According to the legends, long before furkind conquered the land or mastered the seas, the All-Father of the Heavens sired a thousand and one starchildren, each one as bright and unique. From the inky black sea that surrounded the green Earth, the All-Father’s sons and daughters observed from afar. They drifted in tandem as the first male and females came into existence, and in time formed families, grew into immense populations, harvested the farms, and domesticated animals lesser than themselves.

Furkind began to amaze the starchildren. What were once a series of simple hutted dwellings transformed into sprawling cities within the blink of an immortal’s eye. What were once fertile grounds became crop fields that could feed an entire nation. What were once unimpressive villages nurtured into towering kingdoms. From these kingdoms, the mortals also produced fantastical stories, fantastical sounds, and fantastical works of art.

One starchild of the All-Father had grown restless as of late.

Known by the mortals as ‘Sirius’, the brightest star in the night sky, he desired to visit the mortal realm and experience all to see. He wished to walk the Earth, taste the foods, and engage in the extraordinary whims of man. Yet for the previous millennia, the starchild’s petitioning went unanswered…until one sunrise, when the All-Father granted his desire. However, he would only be allowed to explore and experience the pleasures of mortal life until dusk. Afterward, Sirius would return to his place in the Heavens where he belonged, once and for all.

Eagerly accepting the All-Father’s terms, Sirius descended to the Earth.

He awoke for the first time on a dune at the edge of a vast desert. He felt the heat of the Sun bear down on his forehead, and opened his virgin eyes, only to squint from the intense daylight. Stretching his arms and legs off the coarse sand, Sirius stood up.

He then spotted a clean river close by, and he tumbled down the dune to excitably marvel at his mortal form. Within seconds, he felt the wondrous sensations of exhaustion, adrenaline, and cool water as he gazed into his reflection; a canine of twenty summers with a smoky-furred hide, golden hair as soft as wheat waving in the hot wind, lithe limbs, widened eyes the color of winter snowfall from the far North, a bushy tail swishing around him as if a storm cloud gathered around his lean waist.

Much to Sirius’ surprise, he also arrived in adorned mortal clothes. They included a pair of satin trousers and a sheer shirt worn beneath a silky cape that wrapped around his shoulders.

“The All-Father is quite modest.” He concluded.

For the first time in existence, Sirius walked. He followed the stream with the knowledge that all rivers came from a source of water. He knew the desert could not be forever vast, and at some point, as the Sun began to rise over the warming sands, he discovered something along the riverbank. Sirius spotted not just a hooded figure on horseback, but a destination they were both facing towards a walled city in the distance!

Sirius swiftly approached the figure, discovering him up close to be a spotted dog with greying fur and wisdom wrinkling underneath ebony eyes. He appeared as old as thirty or forty winters and wore a white cloak to protect from the desert Sun. Pouches and tied bags dangled from all sides of the strong horse at his command, and from the fragrant scents of spice and perfume wafting from them, Sirius deduced he must have been what the mortals called a merchant. He traded things for other things.

“Fellow traveler,” he spoke up while waving to the stranger. “What city is this?”

“What city?” Confused at first when spotting the peculiar canine walking beside his horse, the spotted dog composed a smile. “Why, we are outside the city gates of Alshafaq.”

“Alshafaq,” Sirius remembered the name from somewhere. “Yes, Alshafaq!”

“Have you gotten lost?” The spotted dog eyed the fellow canine and his strange clothes. “I cannot recall seeing any travelling caravan along this route.”

“I have been travelling along this river,” Sirius pointed to the babbling waters within a stone’s throw to their flank. “The All-Father has granted me but a single day to see everything and experience everything to offer!”

“That is wonderful to hear, young man!” The spotted dog cheered, then glanced to the stone walls looming closer to them. Concern laced the elder canine’s features. “Did your father provide you with currency for the toll price? You do not have a money pouch.”

“Toll price?” He pondered aloud. “Do you mean I must give silver and gold coins to the guards in order to enter Alshafaq?”

His new companion nodded, “Correct.”

At first, a lightning bolt of fear coursed through Sirius. He did not consider the intricacies and nuanced laws of furkind when falling to the Earth, nor did it occur to him how much currency played a role in the daily life of mortals. He would not be able to enter the city.

“Do not worry, young man. I can provide for both of us,” the spotted dog chuckled at the latent fear suffering all over the white-furred stranger. “The toll price is only a single coin. All I ask is that you consider this for next time if you’re to go somewhere.”

“Thank you, sir!” Sirius brightened up and bowed his head in gratitude. “Thank you!”

Upon entering the city of Alshafaq, Sirius found himself teleported to a new world. Sights and smells and scents he could only imagine drenched his virgin nostrils as he wandered through a moving sea of mortals going about their daily lives. At first, the starchild attempted to break through the waves of sunburnt or concealed shoulders, only to be miraculously swept away like a tiny leaf in random directions. His feeble form bobbed and sifted, jerked, and weaved, any effort in breaking free from the ever-moving crowd more futile.

Eventually though, Sirius gathered the strength to push through, and finally burst out of the tide’s clutches, only to find himself standing awestruck. He discovered what the mortals called a ‘bazaar’; a gathering place for artisans and merchants from cornering regions desiring to barter their goods for either silver or gold.

Undeterred by his previous misgivings towards crowds, Sirius embarked into the densely packed row of tents, carts, and stationed caravans. He marveled at every spice and item presented to him by vibrant sellers. During his meandering, wandering from one seller to the next, the starchild encountered fascinating furs. One bearded ursine insisted the canine would be fashionable wearing a silken shirt brought all the way from the far south. A flamboyant jeweler asked if he knew who fashioned his bracelets, only to become completely distracted by a pair of newlyweds. A pair of vixens successfully persuaded him to feel a soft carpet that would be wonderful for his home, only to shun him away when he said he did not possess any coins.

One caravan enamored him with the scenes of perfume. Sirius fell deeply in love with the powerful aromas of peppermint, grass, jasmine, cinnamon, and lavender. The scent referred to as ‘ambrosian nectar’ invigorated the starchild’s senses. He felt tempted to snatch a bottle for himself when a low grumbling suddenly vibrated in the pit of his stomach.

Startled and a tad curious, Sirius gently placed his paw to his abdomen until it stirred silently. Did his mortal form require nourishment? Without much thought, his eyes fell on several woven baskets of fruits near the edge of the bazaar, and he approached their seller.

The seller, an old crocodile with an eyepatch, stood up from his chair. “Do you have anything?” He asked the canine. “If not, we can barter. I sell the best pomegranates from here to Ursa!”

Sirius almost said he did not have anything, only to silence himself. If he told the crocodile he was penniless, he would be sent away, and what little understanding he possessed of mortals told him there would be dire consequences of stealing. Hungry or not, Sirius did not want to return to the Heavens and explain to his siblings how an impulse led to him experiencing the agony of a sliced limb or a painful night in Alshafaq’s jail cells.

“Well?” The crocodile snarled impatiently at him. “Do you have anything? Anything?”

An idea crossed the starchild’s mind. He reached into his pocket and recalling countless memories of the other starchildren creating everything from nothing as they lounged in the Heavens. His brothers Polaris and Altair were fond of producing diamonds and obsidian from specks of dust while his sisters Aquilla and Lyra often competed for who could weave the best golden tapestries from strands of oxygen floating in the black sea.

Sirius concentrated for a precious moment. Then, he presented a lump of solid gold in the palm of his paw to the seller. “Is this satisfactory for you?” he asked coyly.

The crocodile’s eyes bulged from his sockets and Sirius resisted giggling. Instead, he graciously handed the pawful of gold to the fruit seller, only to Sirius himself to gasp when the large crocodile graciously handed him the entire basket.

“For this much gold, you may have a whole basket, young man!” The crocodile grinned sharply as Sirius grasped around the rather large basket in his arms. “Come again any day!”

As well as providing Sirius with a mortal form that could transmute oxygen into gold, the All-Father had graciously allowed for endurance and strength too. He carried the basket in his arms for several steps though before Sirius became tired of possessing such a comical number of pomegranates. In the name of the Heavens, he only wanted one of the fruits! He could not even see ahead of him without stumbling towards an annoyed mortal or two. Sirius considered simply abandoning the basket until two small figures drifted in the corners of his eye. He turned and immediately stood still, momentarily letting go of the basket, as he spotted two cubs sitting against the clay wall of a building, the eldest of whom presented a tin pot rattling with coins.

Sirius and his innumerable siblings were well-aware of starvation. They witnessed such things during wars, disease, natural disasters, vicious acts of cruelty and the worst famines.

He gripped the basket and casually strolled to the two cubs, the oldest of whom eyed Sirius warily while the youngest licked his chops. The suspicious one appeared no older than fifteen summers, if any. It was hard to know for sure due to their skeletal arms.

“Please take this,” Sirius set the basket between him and the two cubs. He snatched only a single pomegranate from the full parcel and smiled at the two mortals. “I feel you require these more than I do. Blessings to you both!”

The starchild left before either of them could refuse. Upon glancing around as he turned left on a narrow road, Sirius felt his tail wag when he saw the cubs running off with the entire basket. They wore the brightest of overjoyed smiles ever perceived by the starchild.

As he ate into the single pomegranate, savoring the sweet juices within, Sirius heard whispers follow him through alleyways and streets. They questioned why he bought an entire basket of fruits, only to discard it to ‘street rats’ like the two cubs. They pondered how an unknown fur like him could afford such an impulsive purchase. They gossiped if the white-furred canine were a disguised prince, and where he could possibly be hiding more chunks of solid gold on his person. Another unique whisper spoke of a place referred to as a ‘library’.

No sooner did that last rumor slip into his ear, Sirius suddenly felt a sharp instrument to his neck, as well as rough paws clutch his wrists behind his back. The half-eaten pomegranate rolled off into the dirt, and Sirius groaned.

“Do not move,” came a deep, menacing voice as another pair of paws searched through his pockets. “Where is it, boy?”

“Where is what, precisely?” Sirius innocently asked the mugger. “I have nothing.”

“You have money!” The canine-sounding thief growled into his ear as his accomplice, a shrouded feline in a black cloak and dark sherwal, rifled through Sirius’ shirt. “My friend and I saw you pay that crocodile in solid gold.”

“It is nowhere, boss,” the shrouded feline hissed.

“Where is it?!” The ‘boss’ snarled impatiently with a fidgeting wrist holding tightly to the sharp blade. “Tell me where it is or I will end your life right now.”

“Tell us!” The accomplice hissed at Sirius’ face.

A fruitful idea came to the starchild. Not only did he desire not to test his immortality, but the yearning to escape the uncomfortable situation led Sirius to testing his powers again. He lightly tapped his footpaw to the earth, feeling his toes glide through the stone and accumulated sand, and he called for it to transform into what those brutes were after. It worked instantly.

Sirius grinned at them, saying, “Look to your feet, fools.”

Metallic clinking on the ground caught the attention of the hapless muggers. They gaped in unexpected awe at the pool of silver coins littered around them. What had been an unassuming patch of earth and sand from the desert outside the city walls had been miraculously transformed into enough polished silver to end the debts of a thousand souls.

Without waiting, Sirius broke free from the distracted thief’s grasp, the knife long forgotten as it fell to the ground and its owner feverishly tried grabbing at the coins like a starved madman. So too did the accomplice, as well as an assortment of other curious souls who noticed glints of gold and silver scattering across the alley. During the scuffle, Sirius decided to snatch away the abandoned knife as well as his pomegranate and escaped into a nearby street.

The scuffle faded into ambience. Sirius wrinkled his nose at the half-eaten fruit caked in some mud, tossing it aside and examining the curved knife he had stolen from the thief. It was an unremarkable instrument. Still, Sirius knew that as long as he remained in mortal form, he could not always rely on his celestial abilities. The All-Father would not be pleased to see him exploit them at every obstacle in his path, especially as transfiguration alone brought him into trouble. Thus, when no eyes were upon him, Sirius concentrated his powers to fashion a sheath for the blade, then fastened together a leather loop to tie it around his torso.

He prayed never to use it. After all, Alshafaq already proved to him that dangers could exist around any corner, no matter if one was a lone mortal or one of many starchildren.

He walked for what felt like forever, winding down pathways and passing by shops, sometimes listening closely to conversations. The mortals spoke about their families, whispered about scandalous things, described their days and the places visited or of which they wanted to visit. Sometimes, it was another faraway city. Other times, it was one of the World’s Eleven Wonders produced by nature or hand.

One that particularly caught his attention happened to be in Alshafaq’s own walls: The Grand Library, a vast collection of ancient and present-day knowledge.

“Fascinating.” The starchild made note to have it be one of his destinations. For the moment, swishing his tail in further excitement of the coming day, he went about enjoying the remainder of his precious time on Earth. “Oh, All-Father, let me see this Wonder.”

The district Sirius next found himself wandering in belonged to artisans and craftsmen and musicians, many of whom impressed the brightest star with their works. He gasped in awe at the pleasurable sounds produced from a musical instrument wielded by a sickly old feline, feeling his fur stand up and his heart soar each time the musician played a beautiful note. It reminded Sirius of the sounds produced by the creation of a rainbow or a distant nebula, one that echoed across the cosmos like birdsong.

He could not resist the urge to dance. He twirled to the music. He allowed his limbs and hips to fall prey to the musician’s enchantment like a cobra to a flute. Within minutes, other nearby musicians watched the full display of their profession’s effect on a single seemingly mortal canine, and slowly joined in with the first musician. A harmonica player whistled out wondrous winds from his metal instrument. A lyre player plucked each string to create resonant echoes. A tambourine player clapped and trembled her instrument in synch to a trumpeter’s echoing calls to the Heavens, while a drummer and steelpan player each slapped their instruments to produce noises akin to the beating hearts of titans.

They combined in an orchestra of epic noise pleasuring any who listened, all of which created a beautiful chorus not even the All-Father could pertain to ignore.

During the beautiful, rising music, the eyes that followed Sirius’ movements did not bother him, nor did it seem to bother the musicians. If anything, their dedication and the happy starchild’s enthusiasm became an infection borne from vibrant fun.

The first to fall victim to such excitement was a tall lion dressed in armor, which did little to hinder his moving hips. The next to fall under the hypnotic music was a pair of younger brothers, who ignored judgmental eyes to dance with each other, and eventually with several similarly aged females in accompaniment of family members. An elderly fox even went about dancing in slow tandem with an elderly vixen, likely his wife, which brought a smile to Sirius.

Never had Sirius enjoyed himself. Never had he felt such excitement leap into his being, from the surge of energy whenever his footpaws and tail kicked at the sandy ground, to the spinning sensation making his mortal form feel possessed. A crowd of bystanders either cheered or clapped their paws to those who displayed skill with their limbs or hips, like Sirius.

Near the end of his long dance alongside countless participants, as Sirius grew tired, a lone figure past the watchful crowd caught the starchild’s eye. He witnessed a leopard of handsome features, carrying a stuffed satchel. Unfortunately for the feline, the strap broke on his shoulder, and the bag’s content fell to the ground. The leopard yelped anxiously and went about hurriedly gathering the scrolls and random parcels of paper.

None of the passing pedestrians either care or bothered to help the young man. Once or twice, they even bumped into him on purpose.

Sirius stopped while the other dancing furs continued to sing and dance and play their musical instruments, unaware of his departure. Surely, despite its wars and greed, furkind could bother to treasure kindness as much as their music and fine art.

Sirius pushed his way through the traffic of mortals. As the frantic leopard left for his destination, he had forgotten one scroll. Without thinking, Sirius made haste. He swiftly snatched the lone scroll from the ground. He held it close to his chest and refused to let it go with the tide of rude pedestrians as he chased the feline. He maneuvered through the crowd within seconds before finally catching sight of the spotted feline and jumped in-between moving bodies until the starchild’s finger finally tapped on the leopard’s shoulder.

The leopard glanced behind him, and Sirius saw a better look of him. Aged around the same as his mortal form, the spotted feline wore a modest tunic made from tan fabrics, held together by a belt and pair of dark sherwals matched together by black sandals. What particularly made Sirius widen his eyes was just how rich were the leopard’s amber eyes, especially as they widened at the canine’s appearance.

“I believe this belongs to you?” Sirius asked the confused leopard between heavy, flushed breaths, as he held up the scroll. “You dropped it earlier when that satchel strap broke.”

The leopard gasped. “Oh, merciful Heavens!” He graciously took the scroll and bowed to Sirius. “Words cannot describe my thanks to you. If I had lost this, the receptionist would have taken my head, for sure!”

“It is my pleasure,” Sirius bowed back, then raised his head up and perked a confused ear, “but why would this ‘receptionist’ do something barbaric for a scroll?”

“She detests it when guests take scrolls for too long,” he explained, “and not to mention, I have already been given two warnings. The Grand Library does not tolerate three.”

The words stilled the starchild’s tail, only for it to madly wag. “You have been to the Grand Library?” Sirius literally pounced on the feline with the brightest eyes. “I have been wanting to see it for some time! Would you mind if I join you?”

The leopard laughed at the strange canine’s enthusiasm and agreed. A trait of the stranger’s somehow compelled him to see him as trustworthy, despite only knowing him for only a minute.

“My name is Malik,” he greeted him as they marched in the same direction. “What is yours?”

“They call me ‘Sirius’!” Replied the proud starchild.

“Like the brightest star?” Malik asked.

Sirius’ grin grew evermore wider, and his tail wagged painfully behind him.

“Exactly,” he laughed. “You could say that.”

Sirius followed Malik closely during their short journey, during which they revealed things about themselves. Malik described himself as a student focused on astronomy, having grown up in an upper-class family composed of four older sisters and a younger brother. His father greatly encouraged his ambition of becoming an astronomer, but only if he did not allow it to distract him from his studies with an expensive tutor.

“What does he tutor you in?” Sirius asked.

“Mathematics and languages, mostly,” Malik shrugged as they walked. “Were you tutored where you come from?”

“Not really,” the canine shook his muzzle. “My…father did not allow me and my siblings to gain an education, as you call it. We learned about the world on our own time, whenever we liked, but did not permit us to leaving…our home.”

The feline’s ears perched up. “Is your father a controlling man?”

“Very much so,” Sirius could not help but laugh. “He cares though. I know he does.”

Whenever he could speak of his own life without lying outright, Sirius talked about being raised by a single parent and having numerous siblings, all of whom carried the names of either constellations or discovered stars. Greatly interested in the canine’s tales, notably at the thought of a father naming each cub after stars, Malik listened to Sirius illustrate his siblings in detail.

The Grand Library of Alshafaq earned its title as one of the World’s Eleven Wonders for a reason. Upon entering the aged marble palace, Sirius gazed in utter amazement at the numerous shelves and scrolls in sight, with Malik beside him smiling at the canine’s child-like wonder, likely due to the immensity of the Grand Library’s archives spanning floor upon floor.

“We must be quiet within these walls, now,” Malik mentioned in a whisper to Sirius.

“Understood,” he replied to the leopard as he continued staring at each vast shelf. “I feel like one could become lost in here, by the Heavens…”

Malik snickered softly as they filed into a line. “You might want to stay with me then,” he proposed. “I have been in this place so much that I might as well become an attendant.”

“I would be honored,” Sirius nodded, his tail still wagging brilliantly.

So, he did. The brightest starchild of the All-Father followed the mortal leopard as he returned the borrowed scrolls, only earning a temporary scowl from the receptionist, and joined Malik in venturing up the grand staircase to the tallest floor. Sirius could not believe such a structure could hold the knowledge of gods. He saw sections of the Grand Library dedicated to different subjects, from history to fiction and geography to languages and mythology to political science, whatever the last one meant. Tomes and grimoires aplenty stacked neatly on shelves piled and horizontal in every direction of the magnificent building.

“No mortal could read all of this in a lifetime,” Sirius murmured under his breath.

“Some have tried and failed,” Malik chuckled in front of him with each step. “I have tried too, in the astronomy department. Speaking of which, we are here.”

What became minutes miraculously turned into two hours. Malik opened up the starchild’s eyes to various texts and showed the teachings of past astronomers and mathematicians, while Sirius in turn went about searching for random tomes to read blindly through. The concept of written language didn’t confuse him for a strange reason or another, but he didn’t dwell on it for long as he switched between readings and watching Malik toy around with star maps and making calculations the starchild couldn’t understand. However, the way the mortal passionately described his attempts to find newer stars and distant world beyond known maps captivated the curious immortal. Never had he seen such passion in a soul before, and saying this passion infected him would have been an understatement.

“You have been to the East?” Sirius asked excitedly.

“Once, when I was little and Father needed a helper,” Malik confessed with a wide grin. “I wish you could have seen it for yourself. The imperial capitol is a spectacle to behold.”

“Even more than this place?” I spoke in awe. “Were you able to see the palace?”

“From a distance, but no closer than that,” Malik sighed. “Father insisted we not dawdle too far from the original route, but I was able to see their own library near our dwelling for the night. Imagine another palace, but this one is sculpted from obsidian and red brick.”

“Obsidian and red brick?” The starchild giggled. “That is an…oddly interesting way to build a library, is it not?”

“The scrolls inside are something to admire reading though,” Malik continued describing each story to be found. “My favorite to read by chance was this scripture describing a monkey capable of fighting demons, leveling mountaintops, and causing chaos wherever he swung his bow staff. He’s more like a force of nature than a deity.”

“I must read this if I ever…” Sirius stalled his next words, “have the chance.” He chose not to dwell on the thought for very long, and instead found himself curious to pull out a new scroll. “What other forms of architecture did you find while there?”

“The Easterners are in the process of building a large wall spanning their entire border, from what I hear,” the leopard mentioned, “By the Heavens, I hope I’ll live to see it upon completion, and if I should ever see the Eastern Empire again.”

At some point during Sirius’ whispered awe about the concepts of aqueducts brought up by a text he’d just discovered, Malik watched him closely. Minutes later, Malik started watching him too closely. For a short moment, the starchild wondered if a droplet of ink stained his cheek or his nose, and nearly asked if it were the case. Well, nearly.

The kiss provided by Malik to Sirius greatly surprised them both. To the mortal, the taste of his friend’s male lips held a remembrance of sweet milk and honey. To the immortal, the taste of his friend’s male lips held an inexpressibly delicious warmth.

Sirius could not describe the new feeling. Of course, he knew about kissing. He knew how mortals in love exchanged them to show their care and affection for each other, but he never experienced such a physical act before, not even in the Heavens. What surprised him the most was the fact a male like Malik chose to give a kiss to him, another male.

The spotted feline pulled his head away when footsteps grew closer. They belonged to a naïve attendant of the library, completely unaware of what transpired, who gathered a pile of abandoned scrolls from a table across the room. As he continued placing them onto his cart, Sirius stared at the now-flushing feline, whose ears were hot as magma and folded closely to his head, now downturned.

“I should never have done that!” Malik muttered to himself between blushes. “By the All-Father, I have no idea what suddenly came over me, Sirius. Please, please forgive me.”

“Forgive you?” Sirius stifled a wave of laughter bubbling from his chest, instead placing his paw in front of the feline’s own. “What precisely do you require forgiveness for, Malik?”

“For kissing you out of nowhere, of course,” the leopard answered shyly.

Sirius then asked a simple question: “Did you enjoy it?”

Malik didn’t answer for an eternal moment, until finally saying, “Yes.”

“Do you think I found it disgusting?” Sirius leaned closer to the feline. “Or that I am somehow offended someone as kind and intelligent as you wants to kiss me?”

Malik hesitated before shaking his whiskers. “No,” he answered truthfully.

“Then I would be inclined for another,” Sirius smiled at the bashful leopard. “First though, I was curious how you could memorize the names of so many stars in such a short amount of time? And their locations too.”

The timid blushing possessing Malik mostly dissipated like condensation. The confidence Sirius had seen prior to the kiss returned in fullness.

“The Grand Library has an observatory,” he explained. “In normal circumstances, only members of the astronomer’s guild are allowed access, but because of Father’s connections, the Grand Librarian has allowed me a copied key for me to use when its not in use. I love using the telescope every sunset I can find.”

Sirius’ ears filled with crashing noises not heard by a single soul. His heart stopped and a cold sweat beaded down his back. His tail drooped too from its once excitable wag.

“Sun…set?” Sirius gasped a little too loudly. He turned to a passing library attendant after standing abruptly from their table. “What is the time? Is it almost sunset, sir?”

“I believe it will be any minute now,” the attendant said.

Silent, absolute panic coursed through the starchild. The answer given by the attendant captured Malik’s attention as well, who interpreted the white-furred canine’s expression as excitement, rather than intense dread.

“If that is the case, then we can see the stars very soon,” Malik stood up and eagerly grabbed both his repaired satchel, then Sirius’s shaking paw. “Follow me. I know a place.”

The astronomer’s observatory ascended from a building attached to the Grand Library and up a flight of stone stars to a large platform. From there, the optical device called a ‘telescope’ sat pointing to the Heavens. When Malik finished leading Sirius up to the top, the former attempting to hide his blushes, the latter did not notice. Instead, Sirius stood in awe of the view it provided. All of Alshafaq and the outlying desert could be seen; the red district, the craftsman district, the main square near the entrance, as well as the river cutting through the city.

“I never grow tired of the view either, Sirius,” Malik said, chuckling as he caught his breath. “If you are patient enough, then I can show the stars to you.”

The Sun had already kissed the horizon, much to Sirius’ building sadness. He tried to be strong. He fought back his frustrations. Yet when his white eyes fell on Alshafaq and what lay beyond the beautiful city’s walls, it caused his tears to flow forth. They stained his cheeks as it occurred to Sirius how he would never witness more of Earth again. He would never go beyond the borders again. He would never be able to venture past the tiny region and visit the rest of what the world could offer. What little time the All-Father provided him among mortals would have never been enough to travel everywhere!

By the Heavens, he yearned to see more! He yearned to taste the rest of the world’s food, touch more of the world’s mortals who could love him, smell more fragrances of impossible scents, hear all the possible variations of music made, and see more of the world’s glamorous sites, whether it be made by hand or nature itself. Most of all, he yearned for more time with Malik as equals in the corporeal realm. By the Heavens, he yearned for more time!

Sirius sobbed. His mortal friend noticed with perked ears. He saw the tears flowing like a spring flood down Sirius’ cheeks and grabbed the canine’s elbows in immediate concern.

“By the Heavens! Are you ill, my friend?” Malik asked in fright. “What is wrong?”

Slivers of sunlight grew thinner and thinner, each a grain of sand representing the seconds in a cosmic hourglass, yet they were so wonderous to see.

“Sirius!” Malik shook his new friend’s shoulders. “Answer me, what is it?”

Sirius did not have time to explain. He could feel his mortal form lose its solidity, turning to sand with each second as it melted away under the intense sunlight of a disappearing Sun. The All-Father demanded him to return, as per their agreement.

Whatever words he could muster didn’t come forth until Sirius finally looked into Malik’s honey-colored eyes. Instincts then compelled him to hold on the mortal’s arms and pull him into his own sudden kiss. Although startled by the act, Malik still welcomed it, and wrapped his arms around the crying canine. As they held each other, Sirius let all his love for furkind and a specific leopard flow forth from his lips. Every ounce of joy and sadness at once.

Another sliver vanished, and another, and another, until Malik required the air to breathe, but still held on against the troubled canine as they gently touched their foreheads.

“You will always be in my heart, Malik,” Sirius spoke truthfully to him, his eyes intensely locked with the non-starchild. “Mark my words when I say our time might have been short, but I will never forget this day on Earth, nor will I ever forget you. Live a long and happy life for as you become the world’s greatest astronomer. My lone regret will be that I could not fully love you as a mortal.”

“What do you mean ‘as a mortal’, Sirius—”

A triumphant flash of divine light blinded the concerned leopard.

It then blinded the rest of Alshafaq, and unbeknownst to its citizens, a curious effect took hold; the starchild’s ultimate ascent back up to the Heavens caused all his actions to be reversed. The lump of gold presented to the crocodile merchant returned into oxygen, the dozens of silver coins either traded by thieves or confiscated by the guardsmen reverted into sand, while those happily affected by Sirius could not fully recall his appearance. This included the very leopard standing in confusion atop the Grand Library’s tall observatory.

At last, the sun disappeared. At last, the mortal form of Sirius turned into mere dust which blew away with the wind. As Malik blinked in a lapse of consciousness, he wondered what had happened. He swore there was another presence in front of him, except at his feet, all to be found was a lone curved knife.

Malik gazed down at the item, kneeling to pick it up. “What is this doing here?”

He blinked once, then twice, trying to recall what importance it contained. Vague memories of someone close to him dwelled in his mind, yet the harder he tried to remember, the more they began to fade. In eventual seconds the memory transformed into fog, and with a disappointed shrug, Malik decided that the abandoned knife likely belonged to an astronomer from the previous night.

The stars above began appearing one by one as the orange sky turned black.

The stars above each blinked into view for the mortals below.

The moon waned into a cerulean crescent, although its celestial light somehow outshone the supposedly brightest star—Sirius, who merely gave a melancholic glow. Compared to his brothers and sisters, he appeared no brighter than a firefly.

Polaris, the North Star and younger brother to Sirius, was the first to approach the depressed starchild. He asked why he shone so dimly, only to be met with silence.

Polaris asked yet again why he shone so dimly, only to be met with silence once more.

Deep within himself, Polaris knew the answer, for he witnessed it during his brother’s meanderings on the Earth. From his vantage point in the sky, he witnessed his fellow starchild explore life in the mortal realm. Never did Polaris see Sirius shine as brightly in their ethereal realm as he did below, on the Earth. Such curiosity, such awe and wonder at what the North Star previously considered uninteresting aspects of mortals. Yet it brought incredible joy to Sirius.

Undaunted by fear or intimidation, Polaris the North Star gathered his other siblings one cloudy night. He spoke to the other starchildren about their brother’s pain, and how he no longer shined as brightly since walking the Earth. They all felt concern for Sirius. They all wanted to see him happy once more.

Thus, they banded together and approached the All-Father. Together, they begged for Him to give mercy to their brother, pleading for Sirius to be given another chance on Earth. One by one, they tried reasoning with the All-Father. One by one, they petitioned Him to let Sirius experience such a unique joy they could not understand, if not for his happiness, then for the benefit of mortals who could no longer see the starchild shine.

Finally, on the next waning of the moon, the All-Father came to Sirius, still sullen and missing his mortal friend. The All-Father approached his starchild, then gently asked why he did not shine as brightly as eons past. This time, the starchild answered.

“I have become addicted to feeling the Sun on my hands. I am parched to hear mortals’ laughter. I starve for another glance at experiencing kindness and love with my own eyes again. Seeing from afar is different than feeling it, All-Father.”

The All-Father said nothing. He merely listened to His starchild’s words with careful contemplation. Then, the All-Father made a decision, one which caused Sirius to flicker in and out of existence, before slowly beginning to intensely glow: on the first day of every month, for a single day, Sirius the Brightest Star would be allowed to roam the Earth. He would laugh, play, frolic and run as much as he pleased, but come sunset, he would return to the Heavens to continue his celestial role. No longer would evidence of his presence be erased, on the condition that no magic was used.

According to the legends, a second sun formed upon hearing the decision made by the All-Father, if only for a single second. Ever since, the Brightest Star has never dimmed again.

So, Sirius patiently waited. He waited, and waited, and waited, his shining aura glowing ever so brightly. With each agonizing day, the starchild lingered patiently for his next chance at experiencing mortal life.

Come the first morning of the first day of the following month, Sirius excitedly descended to the outskirts of Alshafaq once again. He relished the sensation of sunlight on his familiar fur, his lips bubbled with laughter upon hearing cubs giggling from a nearby caravan, and tears flowed forth when Sirius walked through the walls of Alshafaq again, but not as much as when he found a familiar face in the Grand Library.

“Are you quite alright? You are…crying.” The handsome leopard asked him with concern in his honey-like voice. Staring and gesturing at first to the canine’s water-stained cheeks, the mortal leopard found himself further confused. “Do I…know you, sir?”

“I am fine.” The starchild cleared his throat and wiped his eyes clean with an elbow, composing himself. “I am just so happy to be back once more. I am…my name is Sirius.”

The leopard paused but smiled amusedly at the strange canine. He extended his paw, then politely introduced himself as Malik. He wished to be an astronomer.