

The lights are on when he returns to their apartment.

Emet-Selch pauses in the doorway to shed mask and hupodema. Though the summoning was completed bells ago, his mind is still clouded with the majesty of Zodiark. He remembers their god taking form, rising from the plaza in a swirl of souls and aether of all colors. He remembers Zodiark spreading arms of salvation across their star, chasing away the stagnation and returning peace to their lands. He remembers voices raised in adulation, offering gratitude and praise to He who would protect them, now and for eternity.

It has been a long, exhausting day, but it is also one of those days when he is proud to be Third Seat. They have done good work today. They saved their star and their people. How many can say the same? How many past Convocations have faced such a crisis and triumphed?

Even now, Zodiark's influence lingers. Their god has irrevocably changed him, tendrils of His power coloring Emet-Selch's thoughts and his actions. Perhaps he might have minded, once, before the summoning; now, Emet-Selch finds that he cares little. They might exist to serve Zodiark, but Zodiark exists to serve the star. In the end, their purpose remains unaltered.

Even now, awed and god-touched, the demands of his physical form remain. It is late, and the lights are on in their apartment, and he is ravenous. But there is no smell of food wafting through their living space, no dishes laid out to await his return. Shaking his head, Emet-Selch settles himself at the table and buries his aching head in his hands.

A stray thought crosses his mind. Hythlodæus must have stepped out to fetch supper, forgetting to turn off the lights as he left. It is not the first time.

It may have been the last.

Emet-Selch's fingers twitch and clutch at his head. A sharp pain sings from his heart straight down every last nerve, burning away exhaustion in its wake. He'd forgotten. How could he have forgotten, even for a moment?

He remembers the majesty of Zodiark. He remembers their god taking form, rising from the plaza in a swirl of souls and aether of all colors. He remembers staring at those souls, his heart in his throat. He remembers standing with lip between his teeth and fists clenched tight, as if Hythlodæus might change his mind if only Emet-Selch searched hard enough to find him. If he loved Hythlodæus enough, if he managed to pick out the one soul whose every facet, every shade, every texture he'd memorized, Hythlodæus might yet return to him.

His search had been in vain. His mouth filled with the taste of blood and his nails bit crescent-shaped wounds in his palms, but he never caught a glimpse of that dearest, most cherished soul. Hythlodæus had made his decision, and to the end he had not allowed his resolve to be shaken.

He always had been a stubborn, devoted fool, and he always forgot to

turn off the lights.

In the solitude of that apartment—the apartment that has never belonged to one man alone, the apartment that Hythlodæus has left for the last time—he sits and grieves. For the first time since Zodiark’s summoning, for the last time in his life, he sets aside the burden of Emet-Selch, and Hades allows himself to cry.