

Emet-Selch and Hythlodæus's fingers wind together, the sunlight trickling through the leaves of the trees overhead. The parks in Amaurot are quiet at this hour, devoid of couples walking around leisurely. Emet-Selch turns his head to the side, his hood slipping off. Hythlodæus's hair is vibrant against the grass, having already pushed back his own cowl. His mask sits askew, tossed carelessly aside as he turns to meet Emet-Selch's gaze.

"It's been quite some time, hasn't it?" Hythlodæus' voice seems distant despite the closeness of their bodies. "I never thought that the most illustrious Emet-Selch would sneak away from his duties."

Emet-Selch scoffs. "It's hardly sneaking away when everyone knows where I've gone."

Hythlodæus rolls onto his side, his free hand trailing up Emet-Selch's chest before coming to rest. The curve to his smile is mischievous. "Oh my, how very bold of you."

Emet-Selch rests his other hand on top of Hythlodæus's, focusing on the feel of skin warm against his fingertips. "Of course."

Hythlodæus laughs in response, the melodic sound a clear ringing bell that never fails to draw his attention. Emet-Selch closes his eyes.

If only this moment would never end.

The sun begins to fall deeper into the horizon, warm golds bleeding into rippling waves of sea-green and indigo blue.

When Emet-Selch opens his eyes again, the warm sunlight against his skin is only a fleeting dream. He flexes his fingers, as if to grasp at the lingering ghost of Hythlodæus's touch.

From here, the recreated spires of Amaurot reach upwards, the stained glass windows stretching on forever. Emet-Selch sighs, taking in a deep breath. The shades of Amaurot were made from his memory, an image of his closest friend, his lover, is a memory seared into his very soul but never to be recreated by his hands.

What good would it be to recreate perfection, if it would only ever be flawed?

A clock ticks softly from an open window, an orchestrion with a song on repeat weaving through the cadence to create its own new melody. He remembers Hythlodæus's long fingers strumming across the strings of his kithara, the hum of his melodic voice. A song just for the two of them, he said with that half-smile on his lips from the shyness of offering up a precious thing for inspection.

"One day, this too will fade."

The voice catches him off guard, the shade of Hythlodæus standing before him. "As will I."

The shade of Hythlodæus pushes his cowl back as he gazes up, the loosely-woven plait of his hair falling out with the movement. For a moment, Emet-Selch's heart stutters and stops with the near perfect recreation of that gesture. If only for a moment, before his heartbeat lurches back into motion.

"You are not real."

Hythlodæus smiles at him, uncanny. "I am real enough to feel. I am real enough to know that I am not the person you have been desperately searching for."

"Enough, I do not need to listen to a shade."

Hythlodæus crouches down. "I will speak, even if you do not listen." His fingers brush Emet-Selch's hair back gently. "You do not need to continue to suffer." Emet-Selch goes still, and Hythlodæus continues. "You do not need to see this story to its end. This bedtime story can remain unfinished."

Emet-Selch swats the hand away. "You know nothing of what needs to be done."

"I thought you did not need to listen to a shade."

"Leave. Begone from my sight."

He straightens himself up, doing a curtsy before putting his cowl back on once more.. "I might not be the 'real' Hythlodæus, but I am the only Hythlodæus that you have left."

The shade leaves, his robes flowing behind him. Emet-Selch stands alone in the gardens, the sun having set during their conversation. The waves lap at the shore, at the tops of the buildings that have risen out of the sea.

One day, even he will fade. With or without Hythlodæus.