

Something Presentable

1,737 Words

TW: Discussion of emotional abuse, slight body horror, emetophobia, manipulation, implied panic attack

Summary: Astrophel finds a forgotten gift that brings up complicated memories, and completes his Winterway outfit.



Clothes have a special kind of power.

Astrophel felt his throat catch as he pulled the ornately sculpted corset from a forgotten corner of his worn rucksack. It still had the note attached to it, yellowed with age but legible:

Something presentable for your graduation party.

-H

The neat, sharp handwriting pierced the magister's chest. He turned the note in his paws, flattening his ears at the still clear price tag. Astrophel's stomach ached at the high number, and a flash of frustration played across his tired face. Any gifts he got from Heldigore always still had the price visible on them, as if the russet tom was trying to make sure he was aware how much had been spent for the struggling graduate student. Though Astrophel had asked for him to stop doing such, it seemed as though he 'forgot' by the time the next extravagant gift was given.

The magister pulled his eyes away from the note, feeling the start of tears welling at the corners of them. He redirected his attention to the corset, tracing the masterful filigreed gold bones that turned into a border along the top and bottom edges of the garment. The body itself was made of a smooth, shining fabric that glinted with gold embroidered stars. It was a truly beautiful piece, and it made Astrophel want to throw up.

How did this end up in my bags?

The corset had not been an easy find - it was nested near the very bottom of one of the many cases and bags packed from when he left New Star City in a hurry. Astrophel shook his head in wonder. It felt like that fateful night was years in the past, not less than six moons ago. The indignant and arrogant cat he had been was a stranger to him. A part of Astrophel yearned to return to that confidence.

Not that confidence was ever really there.

His head pounded with exhaustion. Perhaps it had been caused by the sleepless nights, or the intense study that had consumed most waking hours where he was not working on the Windrose banner restoration efforts, or maybe even the recent nightmare with the strange *Emissary*. Regardless of the base cause of the headache, Astrophel felt his eyelids drooping. Sighing, he set the corset aside and flopped back onto the warm bed he sat on.

The magister stared at the flickering candlelight shadows playing across the ceiling. He raised a paw and directed them to and fro. The excitement of understanding his magic as a way to control both light and shadow chased away the stresses of the headache for a few moments, but a stabbing doubling of the pain behind his eyes turned the smooth, playful motions of the shadows jagged and jerky before Astrophel finally released them from his control. As the shadows returned to their flickering positions, he closed his eyes, hoping the dark would ease his headache.

The room rocked in a rhythmic tempo with waves carrying the ferry to Winterway. The large, slow motions created a calming rhythm that lulled him into an exhausted sleep.

The world is an inky black, desolate and quiet. Astrophel feels both untethered to the nothing around him and swallowed up by it. He reaches out a paw to dispel the shadow, and realizes with a lurch that he has no paw. He has no body in this strange dark place. He is nobody in this place. While a

waking Astrophel would have found the epiphany horrifying, sleep and dream softens the blow of being just a consciousness in the shadow, and turns it to curiosity.

The mind that he is extends its reach to the edges of the nothing. It winds playfully through the not-space, identical to the way the shadows had moved to his whims before. And like the shadows before it, the graceful movement is soon shattered by a shooting white pain through the black. Astrophel pulls back into what is and also is not himself, and a new dream takes form.

Disarming green eyes fill the world, and a handsome face comes into view. His rusty fur is carefully clipped, brushed into a neat style. His clothes are tasteful and expensive. His expression is light and humorous and welcoming.

Heldigore.

They were in Rosie's, a cafe just a few minutes away from the library. The atmosphere was subdued - patrons were reading, drinking, or quietly conversing with their friends. Midday light filtered into reds, blues, and greens through the front window, a stained glass pane with a simple rose logo.

Two cats sat facing each other at a small table, the wooden surface protected by a colorful floral tablecloth. One was tall and sleek, with russet markings along his pelt. The other was short, with a disheveled look and gray tabby fur interrupted by the occasional silver hair. Both of them stirred quietly at the sweet-smelling tea in their respective cups. The sleek tom broke the silence, grinning as he spoke.

"Sorry I couldn't bring you somewhere nicer for our first date. I know you have to get back to the library soon."

Astrophel blinked, feeling as though he had forgotten something. He glanced at the red tom sitting across from him, and shrugged.

"Hey, it's not a problem. I think you and I have bigger fish to fry than tracking down the most hoity-toity place in New Star. Besides, Rosie's is nice."

The larger cat gave a chuckle in response. It was haughty and just slightly louder than any of the surrounding cafe patrons. Astrophel felt the sear of a few pairs of eyes in their table's direction, but avoided looking around.

"Hoity-toity? Where did you learn that kind of word?"

Embarrassment and indignity flashed across Astrophel's face. He began to retort, when Heldigore smiled at him and placed a reassuring paw on his.

"Hey, it's adorable. I think it adds to your charm, Astrophel."

Astrophel tensed up for a moment, claws digging into the floral tablecloth and causing it to bunch up ever so slightly. He was not expecting the touch, and it took everything in him to not yank his paw away.

Heldigore's just being nice, you need to lighten up. Besides, this is a date - of course he wants to hold your paw.

The gray cat's sour expression dissolved into a nervous smile. He laughed politely at Heldigore's... compliment? It was always so hard for him to read other cat's emotions, and for whatever reason it was even more difficult to understand the tom's. Astrophel forced himself to relax his posture, and ease the tension in his body from the unexpected touch.

"Uh, thank you, I guess. I just heard the word as I was growing up," Astrophel let the response hang in the air for a few moments before trying to navigate away from the subject of upbringings.

No need to bore Heldigore with farm stories.

"So, uh, what brought on you asking me out to coffee? We haven't spoken much at work."

Heldigore widened his friendly green eyes, and Astrophel found himself entranced by them.

"Well, I was shocked when I heard you weren't seeing anyone! I honestly couldn't believe it when I first heard that an intelligent, motivated, cute tom like you didn't have a partner..."

As Heldigore speaks, the memory fades bit by bit. First the reflected stained glass light of Rosie's window dulls into a deep black, shadows overtaking the cafe's warm glow. The gentle murmur of cats becomes muffled before fully vanishing. Next the interior starts to go; tables, chairs, cups and counters all melt into first a gray then black slurry. Astrophel's vision darts around the space as the faces of Rosie's patrons and staff blur and their bodies become indistinguishable from the growing nothing.

The world is dead quiet, with only Heldigore and Astrophel left.

The magister's face is lined with exhaustion and streaked with silver hairs. His nose is bent from breaking it in the Laurelstone's explosion.

The heir's face is twisted into a scowl and eyes glinting with contempt. His clothes are neatly pressed for a graduation ceremony.

Astrophel feels his heartbeat turn into a hum, and hears a ringing in his ears. Heldigore opens his mouth and shadow pours out of it onto the floral print tablecloth. The black ichor spreads, eating at the fabric and melting the table. Astrophel bolts up from his chair and stumbles back. As he gets some distance between himself and Heldigore, the russet tom dissolves into the shadow and the melting table vanishes and Astrophel is alone.

The magister sat up with a start, heart pounding as if he had just been running. Out of instinct, he raised his paw to focus the glowing candlelight into a beam, and he moved the light across the room. When the illumination did not expose any hiding dangers or shadowy ichor, Astrophel relinquished control of the light, urging his heartbeat to slow.

He sat at the edge of his bed for a long time, immobile, save for a slight shiver. His mouth felt dry and the headache he had fallen asleep with had not vanished. If anything, the fitful nap had made it worse. Astrophel reached out in the dark for a blanket, or anything else that could provide some warmth, and his paw brushed against cold, intricate metal.

Grasping the corset, he brought it close to him. Astrophel's mind raced with memories of the cat who had purchased it. His stomach twisted with thoughts of betrayal and grief and inferiority, but among the menagerie of broiling, painful feelings there was one emotion present that hurt the most.

The rush of memories slowed and settled on the image of Heldigore, sitting across from him in the cafe - green eyes glinting with humor, smile inviting and hopeful. Astrophel shook his head, trying to dislodge the feeling. Like the shadows in his dream, it ate at his being, burning his soul with gnawing shame.

The magister loosened his grip on the corset, and examined it in his paws for some time. In a motion that was slow and heavy, he placed it into the bag that held his new clothes for Winterway, folded and ready for the third expedition. He blew out the candle and collapsed

