

Table For One

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Hello there. It's, uh, me: Dave. So, this is gonna be a bit weird. I've never told this story in quite this way before, but I just... I need to get it out. I'm honestly not sure where to begin, so just...

We walk into a restaurant. It's our favorite, and one we have been going to on date-nights for almost two decades. There are hearts all over the walls, because today is February fourteenth—Valentine's Day.

A somewhat frazzled woman looks at me, not even glancing at my fiancée. "Order for pickup?" she asks, helpfully. After all, who would be here alone on this, of all days?

"Table for one, please." It is said with a smile. Standing next to me is an amazing woman, whom I am thankful to share my life with.

Still acknowledging only me, the hostess nods. I see her eyes quickly dart to the ring on my finger. It is neither flashy nor ornate. It's not even gold. Gold is flashy and shiny, but it is soft and fragile. While the yellow metal has long been a symbol, mine tells a different tale. Mine is a titanium ring. What it lacks in visibility, it makes up for in strength. It seems like a much better symbol for our relationship. The inside bears a simple inscription:

"Amor aeternus ex Celestia"

We are led to a table off in one corner of the restaurant. For a moment, I see a flash of pity on the hostess's face. It is a look I have seen enough to easily recognize. Celestia and I sit down, and the hostess removes the second place setting from the table. A moment later, a different server sets down a new set of silverware and napkin in front of Celestia.

I suppose she might need a bit of explanation, starting with her name. She was born in the year 1984, well before a cartoon popularized the name. She was born on a clear night, and that was what inspired the name.

I'm sure that, at this point, you are wondering why we enjoy a place that treats my fiancée like this. That... is where the more complicated part of the story comes in. You see, she isn't human. For that matter, she isn't on this plane of existence.

Let me tell you a bit about her. We have taken to calling her species "nightmares", and there are many different varieties and subspecies of them. Speaking more specifically about Celestia, she stands around 8' tall, has pure milky-white skin, and is entirely hairless. If you have ever had the chance to pet a shark, most of her body has that same rough texture. The irises of her eyes are bright red, though with round pupils like a human. As for her teeth, if you picture a cartoon shark, they have that same pattern of interlocking triangles.

The inhuman traits don't end there, though. She has three toes on almost elephant-like feet, three fingers and a thumb on each hand, and I can't forget the tendrils. She has three long tendrils that extend upward from her head, curving down and falling almost like hair down to her knees (well, if hair had vertebrae and a spinal cord inside them). They are extremely sensitive, particularly to vibration. If she is sitting with them resting on the floor, she could tell you exactly who is in which room of the house, just by feeling the vibrations through the floor.

I could go on a lot longer about her unique biology, and maybe I'll do that

in another story or something. For now, let's get back to that part about the silverware. The human hostess had removed them, and a server from her plane of existence had set down replacement ones for her. Their society extends to other places beyond Earth, but when they are here, it exists side-by-side with ours. A few minutes later, my server takes my order, followed by her server taking hers. Soon after, a teapot is brought out for me, followed by a big mug of coffee for Celestia. Not long after that, the food arrives.

We enjoy our dinner in silence. We were fortunate enough tonight to be seated with her back to a painting on the wall, giving me an excuse to look up at her. While there is no real harm in being seen as an eccentric who stares at blank walls while eating, it is important to maintain the habit of caution for when it would be a problem. I give her only a brief smile, for the same reason. To an observer, perhaps I thought of a joke I heard earlier that still brings a smile to my face.

For her part, Celestia is beaming back at me. While she knows the limitations I am working within, she loves these times together. She has told me that those brief glances and smiles say so much, and that our dinners together are a treasure. Celestia has a way with words, made more impressive by English being her second language. I've heard her native one spoken many times. It often comes across as a combination of roars and physical gestures. With her deep voice, it can sound quite intimidating if she is on a conference call that turns ugly.

But that same voice can sound silky smooth. When I am sick or under a lot of stress, she will sit beside me and quietly sing me to sleep. And after taking a sip of her coffee, she gives me a warm smile and says the three words that always make my heart melt.

"I love you."

She knows that I cannot reply now, but that is part of why she says it. It is her way of telling me that no matter what our current circumstances may be, it doesn't make her love me any less.

Another couple is sitting beside us—both human. I see one of them nod in our direction (most people aren't as subtle as they think they are.) As their partner's eyes dart toward us, I meet their gaze with a smile and a nod. Their face turns red as they look back over at their date. To them, maybe I am someone who got stood up by my date. If they didn't see the ring, maybe they see me as some lonely soul who happened to decide to eat out on Valentine's Day.

The looks, glances, and flashes of pity are made almost more difficult by the knowledge that they often come from a place of compassion. I only wish I could explain to them that I am as far from lonely as one can be, and that my "visibility-challenged" date and I are having a great time together.

That thought distracts me, leading me to wonder how others would react, if they knew. I can't help chuckling a little, thinking about one conversation in particular. "Mom? Dad? I'd like you to meet my fiancée..." It's funny to think about, but I also find it fascinating that this monster (we use the word as a pet-name) has such deep feelings for someone like me. She sees in me what I

sometimes can't even see in myself. Rain or shine, we have always been there for each other.

My train of thought is suddenly derailed by something interesting. Someone at another nearby table has glanced over. Their eyes don't land on me, but on the seat across from me. Perhaps it is coincidence, or perhaps they can see her too. In either case, their eyes linger for a half-second longer than could easily be explained, before going back to their meal.

I have encountered people like them before—others who can see them. It doesn't happen often, and if they say anything to me at all, it is usually a veiled acknowledgement. Still, I take it as an encouraging sign. For years, I thought I was crazy. But as time has gone on, I've learned there are people like me out there. Not just moments like this, but we have met couples like ourselves.

We finish our dinner, and as we are sipping our tea and coffee (Celestia is a coffee fiend who can't stand "that weird leaf-water". I enjoy both, and this restaurant has amazing tea.), her server arrives first with her bill and fortune cookie. Their restaurants will often imitate how ours operate, since it matches the signs and decor that are already here physically. A moment later, mine arrives.

We crack open our cookies, and she reads hers out loud to me. "You will make someone's day today."

I slide mine forward to where she can easily read it. "You will find love in strange places." We exchange a brief grin, thinking that the writer of that fortune probably never imagined how right they would be.

We then walk to the front to pay. They have established very elaborate ways in most restaurants for astral people to be able to order, dine, and pay without bumping into a physical person. I have seen the results of collisions like that happening before. It's not pretty for the astral one. In this restaurant, it is a raised loft in the few feet of headroom between human standing height and the ceiling. It is a bit awkward, but that is just part of the reality for astrals who want to live here.

We step outside, and the streetlights have come on for the night. Still, we walk in silence to the car. As I climb into the driver's seat, Celestia opens the door and slides into the passenger side. My small hatchback is a bit of a tight fit for the eight-foot-tall lady, but with the seat leaned all the way back, she can lay down in relative comfort. Only after my door is closed do I turn and say with a smile, "I love you too!"

We take the usual scenic route home, a twisting road through the countryside that loosely follows a long creek. There is loud music on, but we are both too deep in a food-coma to have much conversation. It is a clear night tonight, and the nearly-full moon casts a blue glow on everything. With her bright white skin, Celestia practically glows on nights like this.

We return home, and as she claims one chair in the living room, I go to the kitchen. There is a bottle of wine we picked up about a month ago, in preparation for tonight. It's a pinot noir - one of our favorites. But instead of wine glasses, I grab a single large, ceramic mug and walk back to the living room. Celestia's gray tongue flicks across her lips in anticipation, as I ask what

we should watch tonight. We are both suckers for “let’s play” series, and we usually have two or three that we are in the middle of at any given time.

Hitting play on the video, I pour the wine into the mug. Then . . . Okay, this is another part that may take some explanation. Physical objects can be picked up, moved, eaten, etc. by astral creatures. However, over a period of several minutes, the one they have will “dissolve” and reform in the location of the physical one. And before you ask, nope, I have no idea why it works that way.

But anyway, I hand her the mug. We have a tradition we follow: “clink, kiss, sip”. We hold our copies of the mugs aloft, each of us saying “clink” when they touch (her copy can’t make contact with mine and vice-versa). Then comes the best part. This gorgeous, amazing lady and I lean in for a kiss, being careful not to spill the wine, of course. And then we each take a sip.

With what I said before about collisions between astral and human, you might be wondering how a kiss is even possible. I won’t go into detail here, because if someone out there is in a similar situation, I would want to give a full explanation rather than giving just enough information to be dangerous.

For a few hours, we drink wine, get pulled into whatever we are watching, talk about where we think the plot might be going, and generally just relax together. But eventually, the wine is gone and it is time for bed. Remember that part about astral and physical objects? Well, when I say that “we” drank the wine, I also mean that “I” drank the wine. Celestia will usually have a drink or two of her own besides the wine, so that she gets a buzz for the full experience.

The two of us then tuck into bed, falling happily asleep.



The next morning, I wake up and lie in bed, listening to the deep rumbles of Celestia as she sleeps. The closest thing I can think of to compare it to is a cat purring, but it is just the slow, deep breathing of a sleeping nightmare. I try to climb out of bed without disturbing her. Unlike humans, a white nightmare’s sleep schedule is roughly forty-eight hours awake, followed by twenty-four hours asleep. Today is a sleep day for her, which I usually use as days to do quiet things like reading, writing, or playing games.

Today, I think I feel like writing. I’ve got a story I’ve been wanting to tell for a long time, but I’m not quite sure how to start it. I’ve got a name for it, though. Opening up my text editor, I create a new file, naming it “TableForOne.tex” . . .