

Badge for One

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(NOTE: Hey, reader? If you haven't read "Table For One", you should probably read that first. There's a lot of stuff in here that won't make sense if you haven't!)

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"Hey, Cel. Got your stuff ready?"

"Oh, yeah, my stuff's going with Leela and Randy again."

"Sounds good. Lin and Blath are riding with them too, right?"

"Yup!"

"Alright... Suitcase? Check. Ring? Check. Nightmare? Check. The usual parking garage punched into the GPS? Check. Let's do this!" As I open the back of the SUV to slide my suitcase inside, Celestia opens one of the rear doors and slides across the back seat. As much as I wish she could comfortably sit in front, sadly it isn't *quite* tall enough to really be comfortable for my eight foot tall fiancée.

"Folk metal sound good? For a gaming con, it seems fitting." We both love conventions, and this one is the largest table-top gaming one in the world.

"Sure!"

Firing up the music, I buckle my seatbelt and back out of the driveway. The convention has (unofficially) begun!

We drive in silence for several minutes. After a day or two of frantically getting ready, trying to wrap up last-minute stuff at work, and making sure nothing gets forgotten, we each eventually breathe a loud sigh of relief. Cel starts the conversation. "How's *Belrye and the Summoner* going? Still trying to figure out how to handle that chunk you were working on?"

"Yeah, still working on chunk SBCACE. It's a tough one," I reply. If someone else had asked, I would think it was merely a conversation starter. But Cel actually *wants* to know. She sits a moment in silence, eager to hear about my struggle. "So, the player's character is female in that one. And I'm just not sure how to make that work with what they chose for the fifth option."

"Hmm... What was the fifth option, again?" We talk about the story, ideas I have for the piece in question, and bouncing things off of her for feedback.

After a bit, though, the conversation turns to other things. We talk about how her job is going. It sounds like the kind of thing that would be stressful, but we have found that starting a trip with talking about things like that gets it out of our minds so that we can just enjoy the adventure.

Since it is a several-hour drive, this might be a good place to explain that her species needs more frequent rest stops than humans do. We always leave the day before the convention, giving us plenty of time for stops along the way. That's just something to be aware of, if you ever find yourself on a road trip with a white nightmare! There are other things about her species that effect things, but I'll talk about those as they come up.

After a while, we decide to turn up the music and just let the scenery roll by

for a while. We both love to travel, and this is a nice, long trip. We have family and friends that go to the convention, both human and astral, but everyone makes their own way there. We used to do it as a big group, years ago, but since we all like to travel and stay in different ways, now we do the travel and hotel arrangements separately.

Speaking of which, one benefit of traveling like this is the lack of awkward explanations and excuses I need to give. Things like trying to explain why I can only put two people in my car when there are “empty” seats, or why I am asking for yet another rest stop.

The trip is pretty uneventful, and before long we are driving around downtown Indianapolis, toward our usual parking garage. While I don’t mind driving around big cities that I am familiar with, the traffic of more than 70,000 gamers converging in one place is pretty intense, even the day before it actually starts. Parking the car, we get out and I grab my suitcase.

As we make our way toward the hotel, Celestia pulls out her phone. “Sounds like they’re about half an hour out yet. I’ll give them the room number once we get checked in.” I give a subtle nod, though I can’t say anything out loud.

As I wait in line at the hotel lobby, Celestia wanders off. There are a large number of astral creatures here, in many varieties. There are various nightmare species like her, Talahazonites (basically elemental furies), floating squid, and many more. Much like myself, Celestia loves to strike up conversation with people she meets.

The language she is speaking sounds like Talahazonite. Since Talahazon’s society consists of many different species, each able to make different sounds, their language developed with that in mind. It only has ten letters, which has the side-effect of not being a fast language for getting information across. But each of those ten letters can be vocalized in several different ways. For example, it would be like if “k”, “ch”, and “peh” all counted as the same thing. Thanks to that flexibility, it has been pretty widely adopted as a common language.

It also means that different speakers will often sound different. Celestia always prefers a softer style, avoiding hard consonant versions of letters. It is quite relaxing to listen to. When I am feeling under the weather or am under a lot of stress, she likes to tell a story or sing a song to help me sleep. I must say, it is quite effective.

Finally reaching the front of the line, I get us checked in. “Yes, just one for the room.” Given how common it is for groups to sneak more into a room to save money, I don’t know whether the receptionist behind the counter believes me, but I don’t really want to have to try to explain that there is an invisible creature who will be staying with me.

After the usual process of paying, getting the room key, and being wished a pleasant stay, I start to walk toward the elevator. Celestia follows behind, and I say, “Okay, room 517. . .” as if speaking to myself. Thankfully, when the elevator opens, it is empty. No fire-escape stairs needed for her, today. Elevators can be dangerous, given the tight confines and lack of available escape routes. Fortunately, going up tends to be much easier than coming down, with people only rarely getting in along the way. The importance of giving her the number

is that we could easily get separated before reaching the room.

A short elevator ride and walk down the hallway later, though, and we find ourselves at the door. She always lets me go in first, saying that since I'm the one paying, it's only fair. I swipe the key, open the door, and wheel my suitcase inside. Celestia passes through the door behind me. Locks don't really mean anything to astrals, and I have been told pushing through things like doors feels a bit like pushing through clay.

Looking at the king-sized bed, I ask which side she wants for the weekend. She generally prefers the left side, and this time is no exception. She waits for me to set my stuff down, and then we go to get our badges to attend the convention. We will be parting ways, at this point. Given how much foot traffic there is in the registration area, for safety reasons astrals do registration and badge pickup elsewhere.

Looking around me as I wait, I see quite a few astral creatures people-watching. The architecture of the convention center lends itself nicely to astral conventions. Most areas have ceilings that are much higher than a typical house. Looking around as I wait in line, there are quite a few of the smaller, flying species checking out the human crowd from over everyone's heads.

You may be wondering why all of these non-humans would want to come to a human gaming convention. For one thing, it makes things like signage much easier if they can just piggyback off of what humans put up. They also love seeing all of the human costumes, decorations, games, etc. And finally, there are some who are there with a human, in a similar situation to Cel and myself.

Between seeing the astral creatures and talking with the humans standing near me in line, the wait passes quickly, and soon I am picking up my entry badge. As I start to wander around and see the things that are already being setup, I spot a large room that is currently unused. Inside are Lin and her own gaming group.

Lin is Celestia's and my adopted daughter. She isn't quite the same species as Celestia, but originates from the same place—Lin's species is a bit shorter and stockier, trading a bit of flexibility for strength. (One of my back-burner projects is a field guide to various astral species. When I have more free time, I need to finish that.)

Lin loves people, human and otherwise, but it is easy for her to get overstimulated. White nightmares are well-adapted to cave life, but they aren't a very common species. The first time Lin experienced a big human city, there was a mix of awe and panic. She loves conventions, but she always starts the convention by finding a quiet place she can go when she needs. If you have never attended one yourself, with over 70,000 humans at this one, there are many in the same situation, which is why pretty much any mid-size or larger convention sets up a "quiet room" for attendees.

For now, Lin and her friends are setting up for a game, so with a smile I leave them be. From that point, I do pretty much the usual convention things: seeing where everything is this year, helping a friend of mine with their booth setup in the massive vendor area, and meeting up with human friends for dinner afterward.

Eventually, I come back to the room to find Celestia already there and asleep. It is still quite early, and the sun hasn't even set yet, but this is normal. Her species doesn't run on a twenty-four hour clock like humans do. Hers is seventy-two hours, where they are at their best spending about forty-eight hours awake and twenty-four asleep. Just like humans, that can be pushed, but Celestia likes to get plenty of sleep the day before so that she can hopefully get by with an eight hour "nap" during the convention.

You might think that would make life very difficult, but honestly it doesn't. When we are at home, one day in three is a quiet day while she sleeps. I work on my writing, read, quietly watch videos online, or play video games. When I am asleep in the middle of her "day", she does similarly quiet things or goes out with her friends.

I gently slide into the king-sized bed next to her and fall asleep. As I have brought up before, collisions are very dangerous. The beauty of a king-size is that we can safely share it. With all of the time spent preparing and the day of travel, it isn't long before I fall asleep, myself.

The next morning, I wake up to find Celestia getting ready to head to the convention, herself. She has a T-shirt written in what I have learned to recognize as Talahazonite, and ask her what it is. She explains that it is from a game she has been playing on her computer lately. This is followed by her explaining the plot so far, where you are playing as a dragon working to keep an evil princess imprisoned to prevent her from casting a spell that would end the world. It sounded like one of the creators might be at the convention, and she is hoping to get their autograph.

I can't help but smile. For being a different species, from a different plane of existence, people are still people. Before long, we are making our way to the convention. Helping out my artist friend means I can get into the vendor room early, so I show my badge and get let in.

Now, I had mentioned earlier that many conventions have high ceilings, especially in the main rooms. Well, this one is no exception. What commonly happens with astral conventions is that theirs are vertically on top of the physical one. So a few feet above the human booths, there is a large set of astral tables and catwalks that have been setup. Theirs sell much the same things as ours: games, dice, cards, clothing, and other accessories.

I will say, if there is a downside to being able to perceive them, it is that it can get overwhelming. Have you ever tried to have a conversation in a crowded room? Well, imagine that the room is also filled with creatures that have all manner of voices, speak a variety of languages, and (since they may not be aware you can hear them) often have no problem talking loudly with others right next to you. Sometimes it might seem like I randomly need humans to repeat things that you would expect me to have heard, and that is why. Still, I would say it is definitely worth the trade-off!

Before long, the doors open and attendees (both astral and physical) come flooding in. It is pure chaos, but in the most fun possible way. Games are being played, friends are showing eachother cool things they find, and people are calling out amazing costumes they are seeing. Glancing upward, the scene

is much the same. (Well, not quite. That dragon over there isn't someone in a costume, and yes, that little squid creature really is flying around with a small energy drink—it's not your imagination!)

Otherwise, the day goes like you would normally expect. There are plenty of fun and games, I get to talk with some game developers I'm friends with and see how they've been, and there are tons of great food options.

A block or so from the main human food truck street, there is a street filled with astral push-carts (much more mobile, in case they need to quickly get out of the way of a human walking through!) I spot an astral food cart selling cuisine from where Celestia is from, right down to the live, two-foot-long worms. I'm told they taste "tangy", and Celestia has one for breakfast pretty much every day.

(Just as a brief aside, it's amazing how quickly you get used to things like a bucket with a few of those worms in your fridge. Just make sure the lid is tight!)

The next few days are a happy blur. Celestia and I always make sure to have a nice dinner by ourselves once over the course of the convention, and this time we find ourselves at a nice steakhouse. When we happen to be at the hotel room at the same time, we show each other random cool things we found and exchange a quick hug and kiss, with a short-but-heartfelt, "I love you!"

Sadly, the convention has to end sooner or later, and far too soon Celestia and I are packing our things up. Like she did on the way here, her things are being taken by some astral friends of ours. This is a much easier convention to pack for than the furry convention we go to. For that one, she brings her fursuit: "Snarky the Cow-Shark". It is a character of her own design, and she had a suit made a few years ago.

I'm actually having a suit made myself, but there's a bit of a story behind it. Maybe at some point, I'll make this into a three part series and talk more about that. To be honest, I'm not quite sure whether I'm ready to peel off that layer of the onion yet!

As we walk to the car, I can tell Celestia is exhausted. Her shoulders are slumped, and her footsteps are heavy. She did get some sleep during the convention, but sadly her species' sleep schedule doesn't work great for these. "Just a little further," I say, the sound of city traffic keeping me from being overheard, "Then you can get some sleep."

I load things into the car, while she goes to drop things off with our friends. Before long, though, we start the drive home.

Celestia really struggled to sleep in a car, at first. With her extreme sensitivity to vibration, she notices every bump or change in the pitch of the engine. But she has ridden with me enough, and I have learned how to not disturb her enough, that now she does okay with it. She also has some padded cushions to wrap around her tendrils, which help.

It has been a great weekend. I don't usually bump into Lin or her friends more than occasionally passing by them on the way to things, but when we are all home, I'm sure I'll hear all about the things they did. Like Celestia, I am pretty worn-out. But the drive home is a nice chance to relax, enjoy some quiet

music, and make our way back to Wisconsin.

It is a little sad that I can't hear the sound Celestia makes when she sleeps, while driving. A human friend of ours calls them "snoring", and I call them "sleep-rumbles", but the closest thing to compare it to would probably be a purring cat. It is mostly subsonic, but it is steady and almost constant. I actually find it quite relaxing and comforting, on days when she is asleep. There will be plenty of time to listen later, though.

It is a full moon tonight, which makes her milk-white skin practically glow in the passenger seat. I think about the weird hand life has dealt me, with a smile. To be honest? I wouldn't have it any other way...