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Steep Springs, Celta, 407 Years After Colonization, Late Summer, Afternoon

Helena D'Elecampane, Del, rode into the mountain town, hot and dusty from the frontier. It had taken all day by stridebeast to wind up the rough road from the plains to the town and was now late afternoon. After two months in the wilderness, she was longing for a long soak in a private hot spring, a good meal, and a bedsponge. And her HeartMate.

Not necessarily in that order, though it would be another couple of weeks before she arrived in the capital, Druida City, to meet and claim him.

She'd felt him during his Third Passage a while back, which made him younger than her, by how much she wasn't sure, but it didn't matter. She'd liked his mind touch and would no doubt like his physical touch....

"Hey, turn down that music!" A man shouted from the street, and she reluctantly thumbed off her saddle flexistrip player. From his scowl, the guy didn't appreciate the sophisticated sound. Del loved jazz. It was a music that only a few enjoyed.

Stup has no taste, said her fox Fam, Shunuk, raising his nose. He was riding on a pad behind her saddle. Smells bad, too. Eats mostly vegetables.

Del snorted. "There are a couple of jazz clubs in Druida. I heard places are admitting Fams. A good reason to visit the big city. We can stock up on new holobooks and vizes." They'd watched all she had dozens of times. Maybe she could see a play or two. "Druida will be fine."

Many busy people, Shunuk said, watching a man hurry down a street.

"Yes, and a lot more there," Del said. "Too many people for us."

Foxes are doing well in Druida. Shunuk grinned.

Del wondered how he would be accepted there, though he was as able to take care of himself as she was...and she'd be walking into a structured society too. As a GrandLady from a House that had been founded three centuries ago, she could attend any society parties she wanted. If she wanted to be a social butterfly like her mother had been. Which she didn't.

All she'd ever wanted was to satisfy the itch to explore, to discover or see other places on Celta that no Druida noble even knew about. Most nobles only traveled back and forth from Druida to their country estates, if they left the city at all. Oh, she supposed some visited Gael City, much smaller and more "provincial" than Druida, but that was it.

"We don't have to stay there very long." Only the time it took her to claim her HeartMate and meld him into her life. "We'll be back on the road soon." She'd wanted to see everything, and she'd done a good job of traversing the western parts of the north and south continents of Highlands and Brittany. She'd made maps of the continents and refined details.

As a girl she'd apprenticed herself to a cartographer and left on her first trip as soon as she finished her second Passage – a dreamquest to free her psi power, her Flair – at seventeen. By that time her parents had been glad to see her leave. They didn't understand her and she was too young to want to understand them. Everyone was relieved the awful arguments were over.

She touched the long, cylindrical security pouch hanging from the stridebeast's withers where her maps were rolled.

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Maps are good. Shunuk gave a little yip. Pretty.

Del smiled. "Yah, they are." Her Flair had changed and the maps were now fully three dimensional. She thought the HeartMate connection during his Passage had sparked that change.

You will take me with you when you deliver the maps to the Guildhall?

Ever since she'd told Shunuk about the great Guildhall in Druida, he'd wanted to visit.

"I said so." She grimaced. "Sometimes city people move slowly, like in the government. The Councils always take a while to pay me for the maps." She rolled her shoulders. "There's a great amount of paperwork."

They will like new maps.

"Yes, I've fulfilled my annual noblegilt and more with these."

Her stridebeast whuffled, then whined. He didn't like the paving stones under his hooves. Steep Springs was growing slowly, in small increments, as all Celtan towns grew.

More gliders on the streets, Shunuk said. Will we get a glider?

"No." Del smoothed a tangle of the stridebeast's long hair, patted her. "Glidgers aren't good if there isn't smooth, solid earth. They're too big and take too much energy to power. Spells I don't need to spend gilt on." Del just shook her head. "More buildings here, too." More two story brick and stone buildings rather than wooden, and there were streets, not just one circled drive around the round park in the center of town. Two narrow spokes ran along the valley, and houses climbed up the hills. Pretty houses tinted in pretty colors with fancy carved trim. Del scowled. Fancy enough to appeal to some city folk as "quaint." Steep Springs was definitely growing.

"We'll stay at our usual place." The inn with the best private hot springs. She guided her mount to an alley behind the inn. "Unpack first," her precious maps and the new landscape globes she'd made with her creative Flair. "Then food."

She swung off her mount and stared into Shunuk's yellow eyes. "I'll bring you a roasted clucker. I don't want to hear about any missing town cluckers this time."

He spoiled his innocent look by licking his muzzle. Crackly skin?

"Yes. Better than a mouthful of feathers."

He shifted his eyes. Maybe. Then he hopped down and grinned. Will be juicy rats in stables. More stables here, too.

"Yes."

Shunuk stretched. See you later.

"Later." Since she traveled light, the unpacking went fast, though she'd frowned at the new person behind the counter when told the room and spa she liked best was booked.

The stable prices had gone up, as had those in the eatery, which was now called a "restaurant." She ordered pasta with spinach in a cream sauce. Vegetarian. She chuckled as she thought of Shunuk, but she was tired of killing and eating animals. The meal was good and the place was playing new, excellent music by D'Holly. That woman did have talent.

She left a good tip with coin she didn't often use. Then she strolled back out to the summer day, lingered in the sun and watched the world go by. How pleasant just to do nothing. That mood wouldn't last long, she was a restless person, but for now it was good.

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There was a jangle of bells on the door of a nearby shop and Del realized it was near closing on Midweekend and most places wouldn't be open the next day of Ioho.

Which meant if she wished to head out tomorrow or early the next day and wanted good caff to drink and more medicinal herbs, she'd better get moving.

She crossed the street to the Herb and Caff Emporium, which also carried her landscape globes. There she settled at a tiny table and ordered some caff with cinnamon and white mousse.

Her gaze went immediately to the dim corner where she could see the faint gleam of her creative work – glass globes each on a rock base. Except for a small coating of dust, they appeared to be exactly as she'd left them. No one had held them, felt the energy within tune to them individually. No one had breathed a little Flair upon them or simply shook them to see the bits of plant and soil and other items in the water of the globes. Not one had attracted a buyer.

She suppressed a sigh. They were less refined than the ones she had now, but they should have drawn someone who'd look beyond the little bits of wood and stone and plant settled in the bottom of the water-filled sphere.

She knew they worked. Her creative Flair was just as strong as her cartographic Flair. A globe should draw a person, someone strong in creative Flair – and wasn't everyone? – to come and hold it, look inside, shake it.

Then the Flair in the globe would react with the Flair in the person to show them their perfect home.

Del finished her caff, hardly tasting the cinnamon, a rarity. Years ago her survey of a valley that grew cinnamon for T'Hawthorn had been her best paying job.

Ever since she'd connected with her HeartMate, she'd been impatient with her travels, had an urge to find him. She was pretty sure that he hadn't sensed her during his Passage, not enough to track her if he'd wanted.

Most people wanted HeartMates, a true soul-binding love. Del was a little uncertain about the whole thing herself, but still there was this pull to him...and had been since her own last Passage seven years ago. Now it was stronger, a true link.

She went to the counter and addressed the proprietress. "Hey, Hysa, I'll have a half a pound of light roast caff, and a pound of hibiscus tea." She always yearned for the ultra-civilized drink after time on the trail, a throwback to her childhood. "I got tired of trail caff and chicory a while back."

The plump, matronly woman smiled, "Some FemCycle Leaf tea as usual?"

"No." Del leaned companionably on the counter. "I'm going up to Druida City to claim my HeartMate." She winked. "Or let him claim me."

Hysa's mouth fell open. "You? You have a HeartMate?"

Del straightened. She'd known Hysa for years, had thought the woman had known her.

Guess not. Hysa had never paid any attention to more than Del's frontier woman appearance. What did the store owner consider her, a mule? Some sterile animal? A person without needs or passions? Hadn't her passion for exploration gotten her to this point? And she wasn't that old, only thirty-six.

"No," Del repeated in a clipped tone. "No FemCycle Leaf tea. If I want to get pregnant, I

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will." Good boast on underpopulated Celta.

They stared at each other with irritation.

"Hey, that you Del?" A man walked through the door and let it slam behind him.

She turned to see the town's communications chief. "Yes, do you have something for me?"

"I'd say so. An official notice from the FirstFamilies Council itself, a big actual papyrus envelope." He grimaced. "And a holosphere from FirstFamily GrandLord T'Blackthorn."

Probably jobs. Del shook her head. "That Straif, he tracked me all over Celta once. The second payment of my yearly Noblegilt come?"

The man grinned, hooked his thumbs into his belt. "Got a confirmation from your bank right on your name day, a month ago, GrandLady D'Elecampane," he teased.

The title got Hysa moving, that was all to the good. Yes, she'd only bothered with Del's outer appearance, not considered their talks, Del's creative Flair, her background. Her noble background that Del didn't much consider, either.

Del said, "Just give me a stock of the standard med herbs, the caff and tea. I'll pick anything else up in Druida." She turned to the com chief. "I'll be right with you."

Expression smooth, she gestured to her six landscape orbs. "I'll take those with me, too."

Now a hint of a blush stained Hysa's cheeks. "Of course, of course." She bustled over to them, set them out two by two on the counter for Del. "They just didn't sell."

Del shrugged, pretending she wasn't sensitive about her work, that that didn't hurt, either. Tried not to feel pity for her creations. This one had a glitter of silver snowflakes, that one an interesting, gnarled twig. She knew they could build a person's dream home – city or country, cottage or castle.

From her bag she took out softleaves and padded pouches she'd made on the trail to fit her hand-sized globes.

"They just didn't sell," Hysa repeated with a touch of accusation as Del wiped them clean, wrapped them, placed them in the pouches.

"That's all right," a little spurt of glee ignited inside her. "I got word from a merchant. I've found someone else who will handle them."

"Oh? Who?"

Del met her gaze and smiled. "T'Ash, in his shop in Druida. T'Ash's Phoenix." The most prestigious jewelry store on the planet.

"Good one." The com chief winked and Del's mind went back to the letters. She frowned as a tingle slithered down her spine. An official notice from the FirstFamilies Council was serious business.