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Note: This is a rough draft. Comments are welcome. You may email me at robin@robindowens.com OR comment on my blog <http://www.robindowens.blogspot.com>

FIFTEEN YEARS HAS PASSED SINCE HEART JOURNEY

Druida City, Celta, 422 Years After Colonization, Late Spring

Camellia Darjeeling stood behind the counter of her tearoom and grinned. Finally, finally, the dream she'd striven for was coming true. This was her second teahouse. A tearoom, shop and gathering place.

It was only one cozy room, but it was full of customers. The atmosphere was almost hushed, the three servers unhurried.

Camellia was offering serenity along with her tea here, and business was incredible. The teahouse had only opened at the beginning of the week and she thought she had another hit. That was worth a grin or two.

She'd modeled this place after a HouseHeart. Since only the oldest of the houses on Celta – usually FirstFamily Residences who were sentient beings – had HouseHearts, it drew in everyone who wanted to know what a HouseHeart looked like, or experience the ambience of such a revered place.

The walls were windowless – a detriment to the space that Camellia had turned into an advantage – and of various shades of brown, roughly plastered and cavelike. Everyone knew HouseHearts were hidden under the Residences, so cavelike made sense.

Camellia had had inserts set into the corners to round them. Light was just low enough to be flattering, provided by several spell-lights glowing like miniature suns. High in the south wall was a ventilating shaft with an ornate grill that also let in natural sunlight.

Then there were the ancient "four elements" always included in a HouseHeart. Here in Darjeeling's HouseHeart there was a small circular pool in the center of the room, with a fountain that had a stem of copper water lilies. Other copper "flowers" floated freely, and when they came in contact with each other or the middle stem, delicately chimed. The fountain itself provided a trickling noise that soothed.

On the south wall, sculpted greeniron tubs on either side of the entrance door held lush plants. The greenery was already climbing toward the ceiling on trellises in the same pattern as the ventilation shaft above the plantlife. A little Flair from a botanist made all the difference, and was an excellent investment. The plants and soil were the "earth" element.

The east wall held a small fireplace, fashioned to look rough and worn into the rock, natural rather than man-made. On this warm late spring day, the flames were small.

In the rounded corners of the north wall were sconces with statues – one of the Lord and one of the Lady. Before them stood tall urns with many-holed tops for the subtly fragrancd incense sticks that patrons could light. One odor-free but sparkling-smoke-producing stick always burned in each of the urns – the element of air.

On the opposite wall from the fireplace were long shelves of jars of tea, also lending an

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earthy element to the room. Behind the counter was a note of color from canisters to keep the tea in, tiles to set teapots on, and teapots themselves, wares that she sold.

Camellia was very proud of the decor and atmosphere. All in all, it seemed like a HouseHeart to her.

Not that she knew of a HouseHeart personally, but she'd done her research – hard not to when one of her best friends was Glyssa Licorice the Heir to the PublicLibrary Family. So Camellia had seen records describing HouseHearts in general, and even some private records and record spheres of an unnamed HouseHeart or three. Since the destruction of the HouseHeart would kill the Residence, information on them was stingy.

A sunken ship had been raised in Camellia's girlhood and the foundation of all her dreams had come from that wreck. She'd reclaimed a perfect set of china that had been her Family's and had gone down with it. A fifty place tea set by a now-famous Chinju potter. Selling the largest piece, a meter-tall vase, had given her the gilt to set up her business, eventually open Darjeeling's Teahouse.

Now she had two. Her gaze strayed to a small ledge over the door to the kitchen. There sat a ginger jar from her tea set, a symbol of her success.

A server came to Camellia and discreetly gestured to a table where two women sat. Camellia knew the smaller one with brown hair, GreatLady Danith D'Ash, married to one of the GreatLords. Danith liked tea, and Camellia had concocted a special blend for the woman. The GreatLady often patronized Darjeeling's Teahouse.

Camellia didn't know D'Ash's companion, a boldly voluptuous woman with flaming hair and cream colored complexion, but since her clothes were in the latest fashion and of the most expensive fabrics, she must be another FirstFamily lady.

"D'Blackthorn wishes to speak with you, Camellia," the server said, identifying the other woman.

"Take the counter for a moment, please," Camellia replied. But as she walked toward the table her pride in the HouseHeart trickled out, replaced by a stream of anxiety. D'Blackthorn was the interior designer of Druida. If she said the design of the HouseHeart was poor and uninspired, she could ruin Camellia. Of course both of the ladies knew what real HouseHearts looked like.

Camellia's steps dragged and when she realized what she was doing, she pasted a smile on her face and quickened her pace, praying she wasn't hurrying to the crash of all her dreams.