

THE HEART OF PERCIVAL

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Chapter One

Adjustments

It was a really good party. This was the first one I'd thrown in years, so that was a relief. It was good enough that most people stayed until after midnight. (And when you're past forty, that doesn't happen often.)

After they all left, after all the goodbyes and the hugs and the exclamations of "Congratulations, Macrina and Gil!" and "I hope the Magid / Feliz household will be a happy one!" had faded into the night along with the lights on their cars or the sounds of footsteps, the quiet in the house was almost palpable. It was a happy silence, broken only by the sounds of us tidying up a little and our cats purring. They'd enjoyed coming out for attention and petting during the party, but they seemed even happier now to have their domain back to its normal peace. In the back of my mind, where I could feel my link with the house, it felt as if she were purring, too.

The house itself (or more properly, herself) was one of the reasons we'd had the party. Her name was Nyssa and she was semi-sentient. (Long story involving a former owner of the house.) I thought of her sort of like a cat, in that she knew who she was and what she liked but wasn't

much for conversation. We'd wanted to introduce her by name to all our friends, so she'd know them and that they were welcome here. The other motivation for the party was to mark the occasion of Gil Feliz moving in with me.

We'd been a couple for most of our adult lives, but we'd had a long-distance relationship for the majority of that time, after our first attempt to live together crashed and burned spectacularly. We'd managed to stay together in the relationship sense but not the physical one, until Gil persuaded me a few months ago that maybe we'd matured and mellowed enough that cohabitation might work for us now. So far, he'd been right. It was a joy for both of us, getting to sleep together every night and wake up together every morning.

The only problem with having a sentient house was that we felt extra responsibility toward her. It was hard to go to bed after a party without cleaning up at least a little. We were too tired (and to be honest, a little too drunk) to do much, but we at least loaded up the dishwasher and hand-washed a few serving plates and bowls that were too big to fit in it.

Once we had all that taken care of, we headed off toward bed, stopping only to brush our teeth and so on. We had to take turns. Before Gil moved here a few weeks ago, I hadn't realized how much I'd hate having only one sink in our bathroom, but it definitely made mornings and bedtimes a little more annoying. We had plans to replace one sink with two as our first change to the house.

As he waited for me to finish using the sink, Gil said, "It still feels weird that here we are, living in a magic

house, and we still have to clean up by hand.”

I spat out my toothpaste and rinsed my mouth. “It’s probably safer that way. Remember what happened when you tried getting her to help you clean up?”

I giggled at the thought of it. Gil laughed too, but more reluctantly – it was a slightly painful memory for him. When Nyssa first started being more responsive to me, after a spell I’d done at Solstice to make my house more homey, safe, and welcoming, I’d tried asking her to clean the living room. Nothing happened, so I concluded that she either couldn’t or didn’t want to do the cleaning. However, there was one incident when I’d been away and she’d sulked, as evidenced by a freakishly rapid buildup of dust in all the areas of the house the cats didn’t use. The second I returned home and opened the door, all that dust blew outside and was gone.

Gil reasoned that she clearly had the ability to do at least some cleaning, and maybe I just hadn’t asked nicely enough, or needed to be more specific. So back when we were trying to clean the house before our party, he said, “Nyssa, would you please remove the dust from the living room?”

Luckily, I’d been in my office at the time. I had no idea what happened until I heard a lot of loud coughing. I came down to see if Gil was all right. He was still coughing but was clearly able to breathe, so I just asked, “You okay?”

Once he stopped coughing long enough to talk, Gil said, “I asked her to help by doing the dusting. She did, but all the dust in the room swirled into a giant cloud and just hung there, until I realized I’d been an idiot, and I

opened the front door. Then it all blew outside. It would have all been fine, if I hadn't actually been in the room and, you know, breathing, when I asked for her help! Or maybe even if I'd opened the door ahead of time."

His eyes were still streaming, and he looked so pathetic I couldn't help laughing at him. "Oops."

So yeah, we were still learning to communicate with our smart house. Living with her reminded me less of the ads for smart home hubs, and more of those stories where a robot vacuum runs through a puppy "accident" and proceeds to spread it around the room. Communication was clearly still a work in progress.

Communication might be something Gil and I needed to work on too.

After we'd cleaned up from the party, we went to bed and snuggled up. Gil was about twice my size, but he always wanted to be the little spoon when we cuddled. Instead of me being wrapped around him, I felt more like a baby possum clinging to his back, but it seemed to make him happy. Besides, the man was a furnace. When he wrapped around me instead, it always felt cozy and romantic for about thirty seconds, and then I felt like I was in an oven. So, yeah, I was the not-so-big big spoon. Might have looked silly, but no one else was there to notice. Unless Nyssa – but I cut myself off there. Better not to think about that. After all, the cats were here too, and I didn't worry about them laughing at us or telling the neighborhood our business.

It occurred to me that, as much as I'd always liked

fantasy books with sentient houses or talking cats, in real life, I was perfectly happy that, magical though they were, neither our house nor our pets were verbal. Much safer that way!

It also occurred to me, lying there with Gil in my arms, that life was pretty much perfect right at this minute. I had Gil with me for good, not just for the short visits we'd had with each other for years. I was still fascinated with my work. I had a house that fit us like it had been built for us, adorable and affectionate cats, and now I had a whole local tribe of friends. I sighed happily, nestled closer to Gil, and fell asleep in a cloud of pure contentment.

So of course we had a major fight two days later. It was probably inevitable. Years ago, we weren't able to live together for even a short time without fighting. Even if we were communicating much better now, we were making a lot of big adjustments and it wasn't realistic to think we wouldn't have any fights.

We'd been together long enough that we knew exactly how to push each other's buttons, but most of that time, we'd been long distance. A lot of fights wither away when you can end a conversation by simply hanging up the phone. We hadn't spent enough time under one roof to get to that place that most solid long-term couples reached after a long time together, where they'd already had all their arguments and could recognize one and nip it off before it exploded. We hadn't had a real fight in years, so we were due.

It was a workday for me. Another benefit of living in a magic house – and the whole thing that had made it feasible to move Gil here once he was able to work

remotely – was our discovery of a magical hidden library. I still had to pinch myself whenever I used those words. They sounded too good to be true.

The library was on the house's attic floor. Originally, the attic had two rooms, one of which I'd used as an office and the other as a lab, since it was plumbed with water. The house's original builder, Ray Hobb, had used it as his workroom for various crafts. I'd learned that an enigmatic metal grating with odd symbols carved into it was actually the door to a library. We still weren't clear on exactly how it worked. The library's windows weren't visible from outside the house, but the view out of them was exactly what you'd expect given its orientation to the other upstairs rooms. Oddest of all, it had another doorway that opened directly to a likewise-hidden garage – on the ground floor. Puzzlingly, this was the *only* entry we had found to the garage from inside the house.

When Gil moved in, I gave him the room I had been using as an office, claiming for myself the desk in an alcove in the beautiful library. As a software engineer, Gil spent his workdays at his desk. He could work anywhere as long as the desk had space for all his monitors and an ergonomic setup so he didn't strain his wrists.

I was a self-employed magic user, meaning I spent my days creating and selling spells for other people to use. (My job isn't as exciting as you might think. I make and sell background spells, sort of like designing computer interfaces or firmware. They don't do anything by themselves; they just help other people's spells work faster or better or differently, or help two spells combine to work together.)

I split my time between my desk and my lab. Since the library opened off the lab, this new arrangement was just as convenient for me. It made me happy to think of working in a magical library, and I was looking forward to getting back to full-time work. We'd spent so much time moving Gil in and then preparing for our party that I hadn't really been working at full intensity for weeks. The freedom to do that was one benefit to being self-employed, but if I wanted to *stay* self-employed, I needed to get back to work now. So I was head-down at my computer, which sat on my desk in an alcove off the library, when Gil walked in. The first time, he just said, "Hey, Macrina-Meli," grabbed an armful of books, and walked back out.

That was fine. I could deal with that. I'd been working from home for years, even before the pandemic, so I wasn't used to people talking to me when I was trying to work. But it would be nice to see Gil during the day, to hear his nickname and endearments for me, now that we were working from the same house. Wouldn't it?

A few minutes later, he came back. This time, I was in the lab, grabbing some verses I would use as a spell-store, which I needed to look over. Gil walked past me to the library. On the way back to my desk, I stopped to grab a couple of reference books I needed.

He was on the other side of the room assembling another stack of books. "Hey, what do you want for dinner tonight? Should we defrost something?"

I mumbled, "Can't talk now. Whatever you want," while trying to remember the points I needed to look up. He left and headed downstairs to the kitchen.

A few minutes later I heard him coming back up the stairs. He poked his head in. "I just started a fresh pot of coffee, in case you want some."

Argh! Talking! So much talking! I wasn't used to having anyone around while I was working except the cats. Unlike Merlin and Morgana, at least Gil wasn't trying to sit on my lap, keyboard or hands. I reminded myself that he was trying to be nice, and he hadn't tried to make conversation or interrupt what I was doing. It was unreasonable to expect total silence when two people were working in the same house. I was the one who would need to adjust here.

Later that morning, though, he had a team meeting and it was LOUD. Apparently, his team preferred to start their meetings with ten minutes of talk about the upcoming football season and the football pool they were planning to have. He had it on speaker, so I could hear every boisterous laugh and every statistic anyone thought essential to share.

I stood that for about five minutes and then walked over to his office, smiled at him (okay, it was probably more of a grimace), and shut the door. No, I did not slam it ... but you might say I shut it decisively. I heard someone on the line ask, "What was that?" as I walked back to my own desk.

That man needed to learn about headphones.

Things came to a head at around 6:30 that night. This time, Gil was the one head-down at his computer. I'd finished my work for the day, gone for a short kayak paddle on the

lake behind our house, and now I was hungry. I stuck my head into his office. "Did you have anything in mind for that chicken you thawed, or do you want me to figure something out?"

"Sorry, need to finish this email. Hang on a minute ... okay, what?"

"Dinner," I said patiently. (At least, I was trying to sound patient.) "Did you have a plan for that chicken, or do you want me to make something?"

"Now? I still want to finish coding this module tonight."

"It's well after six. Any idea when you might be done?"

"No, sorry. Is there a rush?"

"Yes," I said flatly. "I'm starving."

"Oh." He thought about it for a minute. "Can you just go ahead and eat, then? Leave whatever you don't want for me, and I'll heat it up."

I turned and left. I decided to go for a quick shower, on the theory that he might magically finish his work and join me in time to eat together, but when I emerged, I could hear the rapid clicking of his keyboard. That left me completely unmotivated to cook anything fancy, so I just brushed the chicken with olive oil and seasoned it, halved some Brussels sprouts and tossed them with oil and salt, and threw the chicken on the grill. After a minute in the microwave to make sure they'd be cooked through, I dumped the Brussels sprouts into a grill pan at the same time I turned the chicken. The whole meal was done in

under fifteen minutes. Gil was still typing away.

I took my plate and glass of water out to the table on the deck, looked at it, decided I deserved a nice meal no matter what the Other Inhabitant might think, and grabbed a bottle of white wine and a glass. It was a somewhat better wine than I might have chosen if I'd been less indignant.

I reminded myself that I'd been perfectly happy having a dinner like this on my deck alone as recently as a month and a half ago, before Gil arrived. My attempts at self-persuasion were not a success, however.

In a way, tonight was supposed to be the first night of our new lives together. First, Gil had been here just as a visitor, then we'd been road tripping, then moving in and doing party prep. This was our first normal working day since he'd moved in. Was this going to be a pattern, him interrupting while I was trying to work and then leaving me totally alone at the end of the workday?

He wasn't downstairs by the time I was done eating, so I put the rest of the chicken and vegetables on a plate, covered it with plastic wrap, and shoved it in the fridge. I put the rest of the wine in the refrigerator too. No matter how pissed off I was, drinking more than half a bottle by myself would be a bad idea, especially on a work night.

When I was living alone, I usually tried to make a bottle of wine last me four nights, and drinking more just because I was angry was a bad habit to get into. I put my plate and cup into the dishwasher, refilled my water glass and took my e-book back to the deck to read and watch the sunset.

Gil came down at 8:30 or so. I said, "There's grilled chicken and Brussels sprouts in the fridge."

He said, "Thanks," and proceeded to heat them in the microwave and eat. I kept my eyes glued to my book and didn't say anything, though I found myself completely unable to remember anything I'd read in the last half-chapter.

He finished eating in silence, then said, "Are you mad at me or something?" in a tone implying incredulity.

"No," I said, teeth gritted. Then, remembering all the promises we'd made ourselves and each other to communicate better this time, I changed that to, "Yes, dammit. You interrupt me all morning, blast your meetings with the volume up all afternoon, and then you can't stop work in time for dinner? What the hell, dude?"

"Interrupt? I asked if you wanted coffee." Now he was annoyed, too. "I was trying to be *nice!* And we forgot to get anything out last night for dinner today, so I was being *responsible.*"

"Responsible is having your meetings so loud that the whole town can hear them? What happened to protecting intellectual property? I thought that was a big thing for your team. And what happened to all your romantic ideas about spending time together after all these years of living apart? This is our first day back to working full-time, and you're already too busy for dinner?"

"Well, I couldn't start on that module of code until after the meeting with my team. I was being responsible to my job by getting it done in time to check it into the build tonight, so our automated testing can run overnight. That's

how this job works.”

“That’s not how living together works! Or not how I thought it was going to work, anyway!”

We stared at each other. I realized I was clenching my jaw, and there were red spots on his cheeks. Was this going to fall apart again? So soon?

I took a deep breath and said, “No.”

“No, what?”

“No, we are not going to let this experiment fail.”

He was nodding already. “Agreed. For one thing, we’ve just driven 2000 miles and then carried hundreds of my books upstairs. There’s no way I’m letting that all be for nothing.” His eyes softened. “And I meant everything I said about wanting to be with you.”

I sighed. “I guess this is our first test. I know part of it is just that it’s a change for both of us; I’m used to it being completely quiet in here, and you’re used to either being home alone or being in an office with people who are all working on the same thing. And we’re both used to eating whenever we want, without having to worry about anyone else.”

“Okay, let’s talk it through, point by point. First question for now is, what time do you usually go to bed on workdays?”

“About ten or ten thirty. I need to be up early to answer questions from clients on the East Coast or even a few in Europe. You?”

“Eleven. I’m usually talking to you until then, remember? Because we were an hour off. Hmmm. Do we want to go to bed and get up at the same times?”

“Pretty sure we do, since seeing me ‘every night and every morning’ was what you kept saying, when you were trying to talk me into this whole adventure.”

“Hmmm,” he said again. “Okay, well, since I’m now an hour behind most of my team, it’s better if I get up early too, and go to bed when you do. Next thing: breakfast. I loved the waffles you made this morning, but is that sustainable? Do you usually cook real breakfasts on workdays?”

I smiled. “No, I was still treating you like a guest. I usually grab some grapes and a protein bar and have them at my desk.”

“I usually just have coffee, and if I’m starving, I walk down to the coffeeshop and buy a pastry.”

“Well, can’t offer you a coffeeshop downstairs, but there is one two blocks away. Or we could just get pastries from the supermarket and keep them on hand.”

“Works for me. Next, the noise thing.”

“I just need to learn to ignore some of that. And you asking if I wanted coffee was nice.”

“You can always just wave me away if you’re doing something where you can’t be interrupted.”

“Yeah. But that meeting, though. Do you know how loud you are on the phone?”

“Am I?” he asked. “Yeah, I guess some of my

officemates complained too. I'll try to be quieter, but it's hard when everyone is talking at once."

"Speaking of everyone talking at once ..."

"Okay, okay, I'll wear my headphones. Or close the door."

"Or we could even rearrange things – move your office downstairs and the spare bedroom up here. The one downstairs is bigger, too."

"But it is nice being near the library. And you. Tell you what, let's try headphones or closing the door first, or both, and if it still bothers you, we can move things around."

"And if we're both upstairs, let's get a coffeemaker up there, and an electric kettle for tea, so we don't have to carry hot drinks upstairs all the time."

He looked hopeful. "And a drinks fridge? I'm a software engineer; I need my energy drinks!"

"Look at us, being all grown up and problem solving!"