

## Possession Is Nine Parts

By  
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*Mekkukh slipped past the spell meant to trap him, riding it like a cork bobbing in a maelstrom. He chortled, causing his skin to blush then fade. Parmian would fight, just like all the others had.*

*Mekkukh was counting on it.*

*He needed the hot, sweet nectar of frustration-horror-fear-panic-helplessness-  
rage. He burred in anticipation. After Parmian, the woman. And after her, the world.*

Parmian checked the satchel for a third time, fussing over the vials of potions, double-packed in moss and fleece, and counting the leather-bound vellum scrolls.

"You're such a fussy master," Alani said. She ran a long, scarlet-tipped nail across the nape of his neck, pressing hard enough to raise a thin, red weal. She smiled as his skin tightened into gooseflesh.

Parmian brushed away her hand with mock impatience. "And you're an impertinent apprentice." But Alani, his little Lani, was hardly an apprentice any longer, he reminded himself. Almost an equal, but tender of heart. Still, that made her a wonderful lover.

Stifling a sigh, he tied the satchel strings and checked the knots. He hoped he had everything he needed, but with demons you never knew. His teeth caught the soft edge of the hand that had stopped scratching and was resting on his neck. He bit down hard enough to draw blood.

"Let me go with you," Alani asked for the tenth time. Her full lips quivered between a pout and a smile as she licked the crimson drops. "You've never been one to react with just enough when an excess will serve. And besides, we're a team."

Parmian hesitated and then shook his head. Alani had real skill and power, more than enough to be on her own by now. If they hadn't become lovers, she would have led her own wizard's court in some other kingdom or duchy.

"I'll be fine," he said.

The king's messenger had brought the news to Parmian's tower. A score of concubines and minor wives had barricaded themselves in the harem. Laughter mingled with screams echoed through the night. When the guards managed to break in, they found 20 dead and dying women, their bodies torn by knife, nail, and tooth. By noon, the madness had started again. The officers of the palace garrison locked themselves in their quarters. Laughter and screams mingled with the clash of swords.

Parmian sighed. It would be well past dark when he got to the palace. He wasn't concerned about traveling the Pololi Trail at night – this stretch was almost civilized,

after all – but night was no ally when fighting demons. The king should have summoned him earlier.

Catching Alani's hand, he bit the fingers gently and then kissed them. "What's a day or so apart compared to the infinity of love?" he said. "Besides, you have preparations to make for your own journey, and I would be a poor master to let you shirk them."

"One day apart is one too many," Alani said, but the effect was spoiled by her out-thrust tongue.

The garrison stank of blood and bodily fluids. Something else, too, Parmian thought. Demon-sweat.

He ignored the stench, but it was harder to ignore the whimpering from behind the locked door. Whatever was in there, whatever had caused this havoc, had been careless, craving the chaos so much that it had leaked essence and left clues. Parmian could use that.

Blood ran from beneath the locked door of the officers' quarters and pooled on the flagstones. Parmian put his palm into the puddle and chanted a few terse sentences. The magic responded. The demon styled itself Mekkukh of the Sixteenth Sphere. The wizard shrugged. Not one he had heard of. The how and why of its presence here could wait, as could the question of destruction or banishment. Containment was the first priority.

Parmian had prepared for a long night, but he found answers within half of the first hour. He checked his conclusions three times and found them sound. The demon could only survive within a living host, and a dead host meant being trapped.

Parmian uttered a hard word and the barracks door splintered into fragments. The wizard willed himself not to gag as a dying general, the last soldier alive, sawed off two of his fingers and then gouged out his left eye with the bloody finger-stumps.

Mekkukh not only thrived on the death and havoc it wreaked in its host, but also seemed bent on that body's destruction. Demons were cunning and destructive enough as it was, but what kind of havoc could an insane demon cause? Parmian suppressed a shudder.

To let the demon simply lie within a dead body was no solution, Parmian knew. Eventually, some vermin or infinitesimally small beastie would consume the dead flesh, make a connection, and the demon would be loose.

The foul thing was eager to suck every last drop of terror and pain from the general's dying body. Parmian used himself as bait, knowing that the demon wouldn't be able to resist the tang of magic. Still, summoning the demon from the general was like pulling a cat from a drapery, claw by claw, hissing and scratching. Parmian waited with charm and ward and spell, and the demon, much to its raging dismay, found itself in a bottle instead of a wizard. Its quavering screech sounded like an addict deprived of his opium.

Parmian mounted his horse, barely able to throw his leg over the saddle. He just wanted to get home and into Lani's waiting arms. The warmth of that folding-in, sparkling with a few nips and scratches, would set him right.

Mekkuh gurgled impotently in the crystal bottle securely packed in Parmian's saddlebags.

The following morning, Alani ran down the tower's spiral staircase, more a giddy schoolchild than a powerful wizard. She pushed past Barthin, the simple lad who was their only servant, and threw herself into Parmian's arms.

"Did you vanquish it, Master?" she said. Her long nails reached under his robes, scoring grooves across his back.

In reply, Parmian shook the crystal bottle. Mad red lights danced within. Tossing the reins to Barthin, he followed her into the tower and up the winding stairs to their bedchamber, but not before placing the bottle on a high shelf in his workroom and putting a warding spell on it. Sleep would be welcome, but not before other things.

The sunset was a crimson and gold smear on the horizon when Alani propped herself on her elbow. Feeling her move, Parmian opened his eyes. He reluctantly tore his gaze away from the small mounds of her breasts and met her fierce gaze.

"You used *yourself* as bait?" she said, her voice rising into a yell. "Nobody to back you up? What if something had gone wrong?"

"Nothing was going to go wrong," he replied, careful not to smile at her protectiveness. "I had my soulcharm, an amulet, three bonded spells, and a prepared container. And, of course, my most secret weapon."

Lani arched an eyebrow. "If we're going to do shop talk in bed, perhaps you'll tell me of this most secret weapon." Her hand explored under the covers.

"Not that," he said, smiling as he gently pushed her hand away. "It is you, goose. Your love is the most powerful force inside of me."

"Go on with you," she answered, but she was smiling now.

They reached for each other again, and their nibblings and moanings encircled the chamber, intertwining and releasing, long into the night. Between the bouts of passion and drowsing minutes of sleep, he told her all he knew and had guessed of the demon.

The following dawn, Alani sat on the edge of the bed, putting on her boots. It was a difficult task, especially since Parmian's teeth scraped her neck and his hands poked and pinched her body. Finally, she moved to a chair. Groaning in mock exasperation, he fell back among the pillows.

"I don't have to go, you know," she said, a mischievous glint in her eye as she watched his naked body among the sheets. "It's just a den of gauntwolves terrorizing the western villages, just some sheep and a few babies. I'll be gone the better part of two weeks. That's a long time apart."

Parmian smiled, knowing that her offer was shallow at best, but also aware that if he asked, Lani would stay. "I'll be fine," he said, missing her already. "I'll just putter around. Try to figure out how to get rid of that demon."

Alani shivered. "An insane demon." She started to add, "Be careful," but stopped. Parmian was the most stubborn person she knew, and she didn't want to start again the old debate over whether wishing "be careful" signaled a lack of trust in his abilities and intelligence.

He studied her. "I'll be careful," he said. "You be careful, too. Not just of the beasties infesting the village, but on the Pololi Trail. It's no trot to the picnic grove, you know."

Alani smiled, indulgent of his fretting. "I'll have your gray, and, better, three years of being under you," her phrasing made them both smile, "has prepared me for anything."

Parmian's stomach rumbled, making him wish for Alani. Two weeks of gruels and thin soups. And *he* had to make them. He started down the stairs to the laboratory, thinking about delegating Barthin to the kitchen, then shaking his head over what he might be forced to eat.

*A breast of goose dripping in fat, roasted potatoes, apples sprinkled with cinnamon, sizzling beefsteaks, fresh white bread, juicy cherries, fine brandy.* The images flooded into his skull, so powerful that he felt drool forming at the corner of...Barthin's mouth.

Parmian ran, leaping down the curving steps three at a time. "No!" he screamed. His hand was on the latch to the laboratory door when he felt the ward shatter.

He flung open the door. The open crystal bottle was on the table. An oldsilver dagger he had kept hidden on a deep shelf was beside it.

Barthin sprang out of the shadows. He laughed as he brought a heavy pestle down on Parmian's skull. Images swam dizzily through the wizard's mind, and he had the fleeting, irrelevant thought that Barthin, at least, had got his meal. The hand holding the pestle was missing all its nails, as if some beast had torn them off. Barthin's teeth and tongue were blood-stained.

Alani was weary and dusty, and a gauntwolf's bite throbbed painfully on her right forearm. The nestlings troubling the village hadn't been much of a challenge, but the old she-wolf that ambushed her on the homeward journey had been a close thing, as close as the difference between the beast's teeth sinking into a raised forearm instead of Alani's throat, as close as being able to gasp out a spell instead of drowning in her own blood. The wolf bitch's frenzy had seemed almost human. Suicidal. Beyond despair.

She gazed at the dark tower ahead, thinking how odd it looked after only two weeks away.

She wondered if she dared tell Parmian how close it had been with the gauntwolf. Maybe she would tell him that she reached down and used her secret weapon. She smiled. He would like that, would appreciate that she had remembered.

Alani looked at the tower and realized what was odd. The tower's pale gray stones glowed in the last shreds of twilight, but no lights showed. She smiled and shook her head. Just like Parmian to become immersed in some puzzle and forget to light a lamp. And Barthin wouldn't think of it unless reminded. It was a good thing that she was back to take care of things.

As Alani pushed open the tower door, the stink of evil clutched her. Darkness groaned. She groped her way into the laboratory. Her toe struck something soft and yielding, and she almost stumbled. She said a word, and the torches and lamps blazed.

Something on the table snagged the edge of her vision, but she focused on the form at her feet.

It was Barthin, many days dead. The ruin of one eye trailed down his cheek and his right arm was splintered, bones gaping through flesh crusted in dried blood. One shoe was missing, the toes all severed from that foot. On his left hand, each fingernail had been torn off.

Alani forced herself to look at the table, at the putrefying hulk that was Parmian.

She staggered away and heaved until her stomach was empty. Remember *your* Parmian, as he was a few days ago, she told herself. This thing is not him.

She forced herself to see the amputated legs and the left arm missing at the shoulder. The right arm was a stump ending just below the elbow. No blood, though. It was as if he had been born that way. Or reborn into this thing from the man she had left two weeks before.

Alani fingered the soulcharm around her neck. She remembered Parmian saying that the demon couldn't live on this plane except within a living host. So, the demon had somehow escaped, and her master had sacrificed himself to prevent its move to a new host. She had started to mourn when the stump of Parmian's right arm moved, beckoning her closer.

The cracked, dried lips moved in the gray face, and a thin trickle of blood trickled down his chin.

"You're next," Parmian said.

Whether it was a demon's taunt or wizard's warning, it was enough – just. Invoking the soulcharm, she deflected the demon's first attack. She felt it slip around her and reel back into Parmian's body.

Mekkuh cursed. He was tired of this game. First, the wizard had sought to trap Mekkuh inside the simpleton by putting him out of his delicious misery with a spell. And, although that spell had given him a chance to slip into Parmian's body – he congratulated himself on his slyness – it was no fun there.

Mekkuh had not foreseen the struggle. The others had been so easy, so dull. This time, in the first few seesaw minutes before the demon obtained control, the wizard had magicked away his own legs and had started on his arms. A piece of Parmian still floated through the ruined body, trying to die, trying to trap the demon.

Instead of feeding on the terror and rage of a host fighting death, Mekkuh had been using all his wiles to keep the wizard from dying, blocking one point while watching the life force ooze from another point. This cold determination to die was bitter fare.

No matter, Mekkuh thought. Parmian could die now. The woman had come back, just in time. He would overcome whatever spells she wove, and get control quickly and painfully. He would ride her to the palace, where she would scream sweet death until he found a new host. He wondered what a king's dying rage tasted like. He would find out in just a little while.

The hilt of the oldsilver dagger bit into Alani's palm. She swallowed hard. She had to thrust the blade into Parmian's heart and, at the same instant, protect herself from possession. She gritted her teeth.

She couldn't do this.

She had to.

Tears hot as any lover's embrace rolled down her cheeks. She knew she would cry forever.

Alani looked into Parmian's dull, glazed eyes, the eyes that had glittered with such passion, such a zest for living. For a moment, that familiar spark was there and she fell in love again.

It was time.

Mekkuh collected himself for his leap into the woman. He saw the gaps in her defense and giggled at her hesitation. She thought using the blade would be cunning, avoiding the magic that had allowed him to ride the boy's deathspell into the wizard, but her defenses wouldn't be enough. Love would make her pause, and he would win. She would be a tasty one. He licked his lips.

The tiny piece of Parmian's self blossomed into fury.

Mekkuh turned, letting the rage wash over him in orgasmic waves, reveling in it. So good, so good.

So intent was he on sucking dry the last dregs of the wizard's soul, that he didn't realize its taint until too late. He retched and tried to make the leap, but the repugnant flavor of love slowed him, and then it was too late. The silver dagger penetrated Parmian's heart.

Mekkuh, each mote of his being a lance of fiery agony, streaked from cell to cell in the wizard's cooling corpse. He felt Parmian's dying thought, but the concept of "teamwork" meant nothing to the demon as he tore himself apart again and again into eternity.

Alani led the horse another 20 paces. That should be enough. She swung into the saddle, thinking of Mekkuh trapped inside Parmian's corpse, lying wrapped in spell-drenched dragonspider silks inside a troll-iron coffin, inside one of ensorcelled virgin ash, inside a casket of oldsilver, under – she sketched her hand in the air, murmured a few words, and the tower crashed in upon itself – the rubble of the tower.

Taking a deep breath, she put her heels to the horse's flanks. She had galloped a few paces when she reined in sharply.

She had never tried a double microcosmos, and with all the spells she had spun through the night and into this dawn, it would hurt like the Seventeen Hells, but she did it anyway. The rubble shrunk and shrunk again. She added a chameleon charm to the tiny blot of matter, folding it inside an invisibility spell.

As she wheeled her horse, a tangled garden sprung up over her shoulder. The morning dew glistened on forget-me-nots that the world had never seen before, each blossom the size of a dinner plate, each petal tip gleaming blood-red. Folks would give the weird garden a wide berth for centuries and spread wild legends about what had

happened there. For Alani, it would always be the place where love had died and forever lived.