

This story was published in *LCRW* last year. I hope you enjoy.

Native Spinsters

by

Diana Pharaoh Francis

. . . and William Osbourne shot his sixth tiger in as many months, and the jamadars ran before the elephants all the way from camp, lauding his victory in quite a ferocious manner. I shot nothing and was forced to trail behind in disgrace.

Fanny paused, her eyes gritty. She scanned again the brief missive she'd begun drafting three hours before. It said nothing of any consequence. But how did one broach such a subject as she must do?

A dozen crumpled sheets of parchment littered her desk and the floor beneath, giving mute testimony to her many false starts. She eyed the jerky handwriting on the letter before her, wanting to crumple it as well, wanting not to have to write anything at all, wanting to erase the last day entirely. She closed her eyes. If only Caroline Hughes had had more strength of character— But no, she had been raised to fall by a father who had forgotten all about duty and honor.

Fanny opened her eyes and shook her head, dipping her pen in the well. She sat poised, searching for the words that seemed immensely inadequate. She glanced at the open doorway where the Aide-de-Camp tapped his toe, staring down his nose at her tailors lining the corridor walls. She bent back over her page.

Dearest sister, I come at last to the close of this letter, for the packet sails tonight and George says there won't be another for a month. However, I must venture one more thing, though I do not even know how to enter into the subject, except to dive right in without fear of consequence.

Previously, both Emily and I have written recommending to you Miss Hughes. But something has occurred which has convinced me that you must not, on any account, receive her. Forgive my mysteriousness, but I have no time to explain more. All I can offer is that she really is not one of us, and you simply must not allow her entrance to Bowood.

Your fondest sister,

Fanny

Barrackpore, 1838

Fanny set aside the quill. Did it say enough? It must. She blotted the letter, blotching her signature as she did. She frowned at the smear. There was no help for it, she decided wearily, hearing the Aide-de-Camp rocking impatiently onto his heels.

She folded the paper, creasing the edges and sealing the flap with a dollop of green wax. She bore down on her seal with unnecessary force and the F surrounded by willow leaves

distorted with the pressure. The hovering young man returned the slight smile she gave him with a curt nod and spun out into the passageway. He tripped over the tailors who sat cross-legged with yards of green Chinese silk pooling about them, sewing on her gown for Mrs. Thoby Prinsep's ball. He spoke sharply at them in unintelligible Hindustani and then strode off down the corridor.

Fanny retreated to the window, wishing for a breath of fresh, cool air. The sun was sinking, but it made no difference to the heat and humidity. The brilliant oranges and reds bled through the limp mosquito netting swathing the wide opening, putting a feverish blush on the room. In that unguarded moment, the unwanted memory grabbed at her again. She cowered to the floor, clutching her arms around herself. Choked, groaning sounds emanated from between her stiff, white lips. Behind her the punkah swished, pulled by a young man in a turban who carefully pretended he wasn't there, though he rolled his eyes at the peculiar behavior of the English memsahib.

The memory seeped away. Fanny opened her eyes, willing herself to get up before someone in the hall noticed her weakness. Oh, but to have doors on her room so that she could shut out the stuffy, bustling Aides-de-Camp and the chattering tailors!

Please God, let the letter be in time!

Letters had such a habit of going astray, of lying forgotten in a customs house or in a pile of government correspondence.

She really is not one of us.

How could Eleanor begin to understand the depth of her warning? Even if Fanny had acquainted her with the story

But no. She could never tell Eleanor, nor anyone else.

She really is not one of us.

Because she was—

Was not—

Not even—

The words still wouldn't come. She couldn't bear to think them, not even for a moment.

She wouldn't think them. She would not remember.

Oh, how Fanny hated India!

* * *

“We are to take a drive to a bit of ruins they say is quite lovely and sketchable,” Fanny informed her elder sister Emily, who reclined on a chaise, her skin doughy, her usually snapping eyes sunken and dull. “Some of George's men discovered it hidden in a lovely little valley. It appears we shall be the first visitors to it for many years.”

“I don't think so, dearest,” replied Emily in a faded voice. “I cannot seem to shake off this dullness. I shall read the latest by Boz and drink that dreadful concoction Dr. Drummond left for me. You might take poor Miss Hughes. She has been at such loose ends since her father passed. And the packet to take her home won't come for a few more days at least. She's really quite pleasant and quiet.”

A fleeting frown sharpened Fanny's expression. To spend an entire day with Caroline Hughes? How deadly! After a moment, however, she smoothed away the frown and bent to give her invalid sister a smile and a kiss on the cheek.

“Of course, Emily. The poor thing has suffered tremendously. Perhaps a drive might help her recover her spirits.”

“Oh, sister dear. Do not attempt to conceal the truth of your feelings from me. I know she grates your nerves. But really, she has no other friends and she has had such a hard time of it, what with Colonel Hughes having gone native after his wife died. It’s a miracle she turned out as well as she did.” Emily’s voice sparked with her natural vehemence, momentarily driving away her lethargy.

“But she is so dreadfully serious and meek. I know there are those who say the same about us—but really, we cannot even begin to compare!”

Emily nodded, her graying hair glinting in the light.

“Which is why we must take every effort to influence Miss Hughes. It is our duty as sisters of the Governor General, and as British ladies. If she is to succeed in society, she simply cannot be such a wet lump. And we have very little time left to exert our powers, though certainly Eleanor will take her in hand once she arrives in England. It comforts me to know that, though Eleanor certainly has her hands full with the children. I cannot imagine what Basil Hughes was thinking when he let his mistress—a native woman at that—have the care of his daughter.”

“I believe the woman was his wife’s ayah. I suppose it is natural he turned to her for solace, alone as he was with a young daughter. You know how this country works against a person. I can’t believe we haven’t been driven stark raving mad ourselves.”

Emily snorted. “You cannot possibly believe that is any excuse. And look what has become of poor Miss Hughes. She can hardly manage herself at the dinner table, and as for dancing or intelligent conversation—why if that man were alive, I’d tear a strip off his back. He should have sent his daughter to England for a proper upbringing post haste after his wife died.”

Fanny smiled, pleased to see healthy color blooming in Emily’s face. A good dispute was just the thing to put her back in spirits.

Emily paused, comprehension dawning. “You, dear sister, are incorrigible. I will never believe a word you say again.” She sat back against her pillows, her eyes snapping. Fanny’s smile widened.

“Forgive me, dearest Emily; I will endeavor to behave better. I shall even take Miss Hughes on my outing.”

Now it was Emily’s turn to triumph. “I expect you will have done wonders for her. Now you’d better be off to bed. The packet shall arrive the day after tomorrow, and there is a reception tomorrow evening for Ranjit Singh’s deputation. You have just the day to work your miracle on Caroline Hughes.”

* * *

Fanny elected to use a horse cart rather than the usual camels. No doubt Miss Hughes was perfectly capable on camelback, raised in the manner she had been. But she had such a mousy, timid way to her that Fanny doubted whether the other woman could be counted on to manage herself if anything untoward should occur. Camels being such nervous darlings with uncertain tempers—Fanny thought it better not to put Miss Hughes’ temperament to the test.

At precisely 5:30 a.m. the following morning, Fanny arrived in the main foyer of the Barrackpore residence, trailed by her two jamadars. Miss Hughes was already waiting, sitting so demurely in a corner that Fanny nearly overlooked her.

The other woman’s face appeared worn, her dull brown eyes shadowed underneath and her cheeks colorless. Her hair was a dull black and did nothing to set off her washed-out complexion. In England, Fanny knew, Miss Hughes would undoubtedly recover a rosy color, and her oval face and straight nose held the promise of beauty. But she had little hope that the

other woman would ever discover a spirit that would make her dark eyes crackle. No, she was doomed to be a wallflower. A wet lump indeed.

“Shall we go, my dear?” Fanny said crisply, gesturing for Miss Hughes to accompany her as she strode out into the courtyard. “It will be quite hot soon and we shall wish to be at our destination before the day becomes too unbearable. The reception doesn’t begin until after nine, so we should return in relative comfort. I’ve had a basket of food and drink prepared and we shall fare very well indeed. Do you have your lap-desk? Oh, yes, by the door.” Fanny pointed it out to Ahimsa, the senior of her two jamadars. He retrieved the wooden box and placed it in the cart’s boot with Fanny’s desk and the basket of provisions.

“Mr. MacNaghten insists that we have four outriders attend us,” she said to Miss Hughes, filling the silence as best she could. “But he has given us permission to leave behind our personal servants. With such fierce guardians, I can’t imagine anyone would dare look twice at us.”

Indeed the Sepoy riders were quite ferocious, with great hooking swords held by gaudily embroidered red sashes, wearing high black boots and gold earrings. Their turbans shadowed their faces, making them appear vaguely demonic. Fanny smiled at the nearest one, repressing a shiver, and told the driver to begin.

It was a tiresome journey. The two ladies’ conversation proceeded in painful fits and starts, generally petering out as Miss Hughes mumbled diffidently into her chest.

She’ll never make anything of herself if she keeps this up, Fanny thought, not very sympathetically. It is a British woman’s obligation in India to provide companionship to one another, to help keep the boredom at bay. At the very least, she could attempt to keep the little boats I set to sea afloat!

At last they came to the ruins. The site was much lovelier than Fanny had imagined and she smiled at Miss Hughes her delight. The other woman smiled back, a genuine smile of appreciation and camaraderie, and Fanny felt warmer toward her.

The place was quite old and long deserted. Tumbled buildings were set in six concentric circles, nestled in a cove of the hills. A hot spring fed masses of purple and yellow flowering vines wathing the dirty marble, which had once been pink. At the center of the ruins was a domed building shouldering above the rest. Trees and bushes had tangled with the vines, nearly shrouding it from view. Only the curving top gleamed in the sun.

Fanny signaled the driver to stop and stepped down, extending a hand to aid her companion. The other woman's hands were fine as a bird's body and they seemed to have hardly any strength. The two women collected their desks and Fanny motioned for one of the Sepoys to follow after with the basket. He turned red and shook his head, saying something in Hindustani. Fanny frowned, not understanding. Not for the first time she wished she had a head for languages. But it wouldn't have mattered. Not in India. The heat and the thick air sapped a person's energy, her motivation and focus. In England she might have learned Hindustani, but here—Fanny sometimes found it difficult to remember her own name.

“Do you understand him at all?” she asked Miss Hughes.

Miss Hughes shook her head, the straw bonnet she'd tied on making her look like a turtle hiding in its shell. “It's a very different dialect than I'm used to, and . . . and I was never so good at Hindustani.” She said it apologetically, looking away.

Fanny snorted. As if not knowing the language was anything to apologize for. Perhaps that native woman had inflicted less damage than she thought. If so, there might be something to salvage after all. Eleanor might just be the one to accomplish such a feat, if she could juggle

such a colossal task with the demands of her husband and the half-dozen of Fanny's beloved nephews and nieces.

The Sepoy spoke again, shaking his head vehemently and stabbing his finger at the ruins. He seemed very passionate.

"Well, it appears that he doesn't want to go inside. That poses no difficulty for me. How about you?" Fanny smiled. Mr. MacNaghten would be incensed, but spot of privacy was just the thing she wanted.

"Help me with the basket. We'll leave it in the shade by the pool here and come back for it when we're hungry. Do you wish to rest a bit? Or would you rather have a ramble and find a spot to sketch?" she asked Miss Hughes.

The other woman was wilting like an English Daisy in the heat and Fanny firmed her shoulders, expecting that they would be resting. But Miss Hughes surprised her.

"I'd like to walk about a bit. It's really quite lovely here and the birdsong is so beautiful with the chuckling of the water."

Fanny flashed a delighted smile and took the other woman's arm affectionately.

"Let's begin at once."

They wandered slowly through the outer buildings, proceeding in a long spiral. They spoke little, exclaiming over flowers and opal-winged insects, brilliantly-plumed birds, and the lovely buildings that had been. Round and round they went, through each of the circles, one after the other.

The outer buildings appeared to have been storage rooms. They lacked windows or evidence of furniture or cooking places. The next circle showed more signs of habitation, each edifice having two windows and a fireplace, sconces along the walls for lights, and the remnants of looms, paintbrushes, and other materials. The buildings had probably been workshops, Fanny

decided. She imagined that some were schoolrooms where sloe-eyed apprentices learned crafts, their fingers nimble and deft. The next three circles were domiciles, growing progressively larger and more opulent as they neared the central building. The innermost of the three had inlaid silver and lapis walls in wonderful designs, and varnished canvas floors which remained curiously untouched by the ravages of the damp and the heat. Wide slabs of stone jutting from the walls indicated where the people had slept.

Fanny counted six buildings in the last circle. These were larger than all the rest, and yet were dwarfed by the domed center structure. She gazed up at it. Sweat dampened the undersides of her arms and trickled down her back, soaking the fabric along her ribs. Her face was flushed and her legs felt thick and ungainly beneath her long skirts. The long walk had left her mouth dry and her tongue swollen. She breathed deeply of the heavily scented air, trying to clear her suddenly foggy senses.

But the odors overwhelmed her with their cloying voluptuousness. Their flavors exploded in her mouth: sweet and spicy, savory and sour, acid and ice. Her head spun. It was as though someone had poured thick honey over her. The feeling runneled slowly over her shoulders and down over chest. She felt a quivering tingle begin in her breasts, an alien warmth that she had never before experienced. Then the feeling continued its descent. It slid tenderly over her ribs, smoothing intimately over her stomach and buttocks and further: down to the crux of her femininity.

Fanny gasped and then heaved a choked sigh as honey-hot fingers caressed her, spreading between her thighs, pushing and gliding, viscous and liquid. The pleasure was indescribable. Terrifying and heavenly. Her swollen breasts swayed with every sobbing breath. Her knees buckled as she lost all sense of herself, all dominion of her limbs. She landed on the flower-

swathed ground, her legs bent beneath her. Still those fingers pursued her, tracing the contours of her femininity, shaping, stroking, weaving, urging.

There came a moment of such spasming pain, of such clawing ecstasy, that Fanny lost all sense of herself. A wave of blackness washed over her and she floated away into velvet darkness.

She had no idea how long she was insensible. She came to herself on her back, her legs bent to one side and aching with cramps. She moaned and pushed herself up, her hands shaking, the crushed flowers she lay on radiating a sickening miasma of perfume.

Fanny forced herself to her feet, her legs wobbling as she clutched at a crumbling wall for. Of what had come before— She thrust the memory of it away, refusing to consider it. She refused think of the way she continued to throb down there, how her nipples tightened in response to her shifting underclothes, as if too sensitive now for the touch of silk. Her face burned, even as an unaccountable longing to unbutton her dress and peel away the offending clothing and expose herself to the hot, moist air, surged up and wrapped her around. She clasped her hands together tightly.

“No, no, no,” she whispered. “I cannot! We must leave here at once. Before—” She broke off, unwilling to think what she might do next. But she felt something looming before her, a danger, a dark door beckoning, welcoming her inside, tempting her to— Fear clamped down on her like teeth.

Fanny glanced around. “Miss Hughes?” Her voice was quavered and she made an effort to speak firmly.

“Miss Hughes. Caroline?”

The only answer was the distant yip of jackals, the rustle of leaves and the twitter of birds. Fanny clasped her arms around her stomach and gazed about her in indecisive silence.

What had happened to Miss Hughes? Had she gone for help when Fanny had fainted? Or had something stolen her away?

There was a sound from inside the central building. Fanny's shoulders jerked and she stared up at the edifice, dread balling in her stomach. Something deep down, something instinctual and feral, wanted her to flee. Her legs twitched with the imperative and she fought it. She could not leave Miss Hughes. Nor would she give in to fanciful missishness. She was thirty-nine years old, for goodness sake.

She straightened, drew a deep breath, and strode up the overgrown path of the central building and into its dark recesses.

"Miss Hughes! Caroline! Are you there?"

Fanny paused in the gaping archway. The span rose high above her head like a hungry mouth. Inside, the air was murky and warm. Within the confines of the space she heard more sounds, running water and something else. Movement—perhaps footsteps? She glanced over her shoulder, but could see nothing of the Sepoy escorts or the horsecart. Her stomach twisted. Then she faced back around, took a brisk, bracing breath, and stepped inside.

She found herself in an open chamber that seemed to encompass most of the dome. Above her head, the vaulted stone roof glowed ruddy as the midday sun illuminated the exposed topmost curves of the dome.

Fanny paused, blinking, as her eyes adjusted to the gloom. None of the detritus that had accumulated in the other buildings encroached here. The floors, paved in polished pink marble, looked as if they had been swept clean only moments before, and the walls were clear of moss and mildew. At the center of the room was a pool with concentric steps leading down into its depths. The bottom of the pool went from pink to crimson at the center, where a fountain bubbled from a statue. Fanny could not make out its shape. Arched recesses lined the walls like

dark, staring eyes, and there were a number of long, wide benches set in widely spaced ring halfway between the walls and the fountain.

Fanny made her way forward through the ring of benches, her mouth dry. She wanted a drink of refreshing cool water. Her footsteps made little sound on the smooth floor as she approached and knelt down. She scooped a handful of the crystal liquid into her cupped hands and then cried out, shaking her hands. The water was hot.

Disappointed, she stood and walked around the edges of the pool. She squinted at the statue from which the water ran, pausing when at last she began to make it out, her mouth falling open.

“Wonderful, isn’t it?”

Fanny recoiled and let out a gasp, before her lips clamped together. She spun around, clutching her skirts in white-knuckled fists.

“Why didn’t you answer when I called? Are you all right? What on earth—?”

The last trailed away as she drew closer to Miss Hughes, who reclined on one of the circling benches, her form shrouded in rosy shadows. The other woman sprawled with feline ease, naked, her long hair pulled loose from its coif. She lifted her head onto her elbow, eyeing Fanny from beneath heavy-lidded eyes, one hand trailing down between her legs. She laughed, a throaty, sated sound.

Fanny stared, aghast.

Miss Hughes drew a deep breath of the heavily scented air and sat up, stretching and yawning, her rosy tipped breasts pointed and full, her lips red and glistening.

“Come, join me,” she invited. She stepped next to Fanny who flinched away. Miss Hughes touched her forefinger to Fanny’s dry lower lip and rubbed it back and forth. Fanny drew her chin back.

“This place is for you, you know. For all women. Breathe deeply, open yourself to the joy of it.” Swift as a snake, she bent forward and pressed shining lips against Fanny’s mouth, her tongue darting inside, tasting. Before Fanny could do more than stiffen, Miss Hughes stepped away, smiling as she ran her hands down over her breasts and ribs. “Feel it, Fanny. It is wonderful.”

With that she walked to the pool, stepping into the water. Fanny watched, her mouth gaping. The water rose around Miss Hughes’ slim buttocks as she went deeper into the center of the pool. It swallowed her hips and reached up to lick at the undersides of her breasts. The locks of her hair spread out around her like black snakes twisting in the pool’s current. Miss Hughes circled the statue at the center of the pool, disappearing behind it. It was three-sided, each side consisting of a woman with four arms and oversized genitalia from which gurgled water. Fanny covered her mouth with a trembling hand.

Miss Hughes spoke again, still hidden, her disembodied voice echoing from the dome.

“It has been many years since a woman has come here. They thought it sinful. Sent Asuras in the bodies of men to sanctify it, and took my Bhaktas away and made them slaves. Such avidya—ignorance. I do not hate them. The wheel turns. And turns again. I am always, forever, and never-ending, whatever the face I wear.”

Fanny trembled and swallowed. Her throat was too dry to speak, and the soft, deft touch of Miss Hughes’ kiss still lingered on her tongue. Again she felt that warm honey feeling, gliding, pressing, smoothing, swelling. Again she collapsed to her knees as the dreadful pleasure seized her and drained her strength. She moaned as the spasms shook her. Sweat drenched her; she had no strength to move.

Long moments passed. Water dripped onto her forehead and she flinched, gazing up fearfully. Miss Hughes stood over her, her skin flushed red from the heat of the pool, her long black hair clinging wetly to her skin.

“My gift is potent. Through the ages, many have sought my font for the power I grant them.” She knelt, her knees splayed so that Fanny could see the other woman’s most secret, intimate cleft. Fanny blushed painfully and forced her head away.

“Ah, as this one, you are kanya. You fear my gift because it is strange.” Miss Hughes lay hot, damp fingers on Fanny’s brow and forced her face back around. Fanny jerked back, but could not pull away from the determined touch. Miss Hughes shifted her hands so that she held Fanny’s face wedged between her palms, bending low so that that their breath tangled together.

“You will come to know me, to serve me. The first of many who will renew my temple with their joy and passion. My Bhaktas do not service men—you will remain kanya and you will celebrate my touch alone. You shall help me fill the temple again, and in each face you will see my face, and in each hand you will feel my hand, and in each kiss you will feel my kiss. Together, my Bhaktas celebrate the life I give, the joy I bring. There will be a symphony of delight that will shake the walls. This,” she pressed her palm against Fanny, “this is only a hint of what will be.” She lifted her hand. The palm was red. A ruby mist coalesced above it, and then formed into the image of two female figures twined together in a passionate embrace. As Fanny watched their passion progress in nauseated fascination, a corona blossomed around them. Tinged every color of the rainbow, it rippled and danced, crackling and hot.

Panic swept Fanny and she shook her head. She would not— This, this creature, whatever it was, could not make her! She jerked from the other woman’s grasp and scrambled to her feet, stumbling away.

“Stay away from me!”

Miss Hughes closed her hand and followed after, a frown marring her brows.

“I am Shakti. You do not refuse me in my own house.”

“Of course I refuse. As any decent woman would. What have you done to Miss Hughes?” Fanny continue maneuvering blindly backwards, her heart pounding, and not only from fear.

“I have offered her my blessing, as I have you. And she has accepted, with gratitude and longing. But . . . you do not.”

“No! Do you know who I am? I am Frances Mary Eden, a British lady and the sister of the Governor General. This is—intolerable! I demand that you remove yourself from Miss Hughes at once and let us leave in peace. She cannot have understood what you would make of her.”

Fanny’s voice had regained its strength, though her hands and legs shook.

“But of course she understood. Did I not answer her desires exactly? Did I not deliver her from fear and despair and grant her a life of power and bliss?”

Shakti paused, head tilting, eyes narrowing, her lips curving in a suddenly menacing smile. They were near the door of the temple, Shakti pursuing Fanny as she continue to retreat. The arched opening framed Fanny in white sunlight. Opposite her, Shakti stood, legs set apart, her long, wet hair clinging to her pale skin, cocooning her in a tenebrous veil. She glanced above her at the blushing dome, her countenance considering, as if hearing a spectral voice.

“But perhaps another’s gift will satisfy better. Power and bliss of a different sort.” She faced back to Fanny, and this time her smile was more than dangerous. It was absolutely perilous.

“And She desires very much to meet you”

Fear streaked along Fanny's nerves and her stomach twisted. When next Miss Hughes spoke, her voice had changed from sultry heat to chill calculation.

"It would seem that you came here not to worship at Shakti's feet. When she felt your breath and smelled your lush ripeness, she rejoiced." The other woman shook her head regretfully. "Shakti is generous and loving, but her time is not yet come again."

Fanny opened her mouth to ask who? But no sound emerged. Instead, as she watched, Miss Hughes transformed. With elegant, bold grace, she reached for the crumpled white lawn dress she'd been wearing. She put it on, the buttons and laces working themselves. The dress fit awkwardly, as if the shape of Miss Hughes' body had changed. She paced forward, back straight, chest thrust out, her movements at once graceful and sinuous. She gathered her hair and twisted it around her head, pinning it in place with a filigree comb that Fanny didn't remember ever seeing before.

Miss Hughes came to stand beside Fanny, her pale cheeks rosy, her lips red and full. She was beautiful, like the deadly edge of a finely wrought sword. Fanny shivered.

"Who—?" she croaked at last, unable to produce any greater sound.

The creature looked at Fanny and her eyes seemed like infinite wells. Fanny's stomach twisted tighter and bile rose sour in her throat.

"The wheel turns. And turns again. I am always, forever, and never-ending," she said with Caroline Hughes' lips. "I wear many faces. As the wheels turn, so do I. I am Shakti, Parvati, Tara, Chamundi, Devi, Durga, and a hundred other names. I am Kali."

Her tongue slipped out to trace the red lips as though she tasted something there. "You have summoned me forth, and so I walk amongst mortals once more. Let us go."

Without another word, she took Fanny's stiff arm and retraced their spiraling steps out of the temple and back to Barrackpore. If the Sepoy escort noticed Miss Hughes' alteration, they said nothing Fanny could understand.

* * *

Fanny looked down at her knotted fingers. The sinking sun painted them in shades of crimson and orange, reminding her of the light in Shakti's temple. Hot tears of fury and desperation flowed down her cheeks.

She hardly remembered the rest of the previous day or evening. They had returned to a bustle of activity. Each woman was whisked away by her ayah to dress for the deputation of Sikhs from Ranjit Singh. It had gone well enough, though through it, all Fanny could see were the black holes that were Miss Hughes' eyes.

She had ventured to mention the name to Gopi. Her salt-and-pepper-haired ayah had exclaimed in indecipherable Hindustani and shaken her head violently. Pointing to her chest, she had said "Shakti," and nodded vigorously before pointing outside to the jungle-darkness where leopards screamed in the night: "Kali." She shuddered and pulled the brush vigorously through Fanny's hair.

Fanny had lain awake all night, her body stiff and unmoving. She could not think of what had happened, she could not think of anything else.

Without the punkah, the air closed around her, thick and moist, making it difficult to breathe. Behind her, someone knocked on the open jamb and then pushed through the diaphanous netting without waiting for a reply.

“Yours is a curious people,” said Miss Hughes in a voice that was both crisply British and liltingly Hindustani. Fanny gasped and spun about, holding her hands out as if to ward the other woman away. But those eyes caught her and tethered her as fast as stocks or ropes. “I have much to learn about you. And you have much to learn about me.”

Again that smile, that perilous smile that boded such ill, such terror and atrocity, such a different expression than mild Miss Hughes normally wore, that it nearly stopped Fanny’s heart. “I wanted to see you once more before I visited your home.” Miss Hughes’ head tilted as if listening to something Fanny could not hear. Her predatory smile widened. “Ah, not one of us indeed. No, I am not. But neither are you, any longer. You have been touched by Shakti and you will never put her gift from your memory, and your body will crave more and more as the desire haunts you. It will be an enduring hunger. And that, that is Kali’s gift to you.”

She paced forward, her lips skinned back from her teeth, the linen of her scarlet dress rustling. She stopped a handsbreadth from Fanny and lifted her hand. Color seeped into the palm until it was the dark burgundy of bruised plums. Fanny blinked. A folded parchment appeared on Miss Hughes’ palm, its smeared, green wax seal unbroken. Miss Hughes tucked it between Fanny’s limp fingers and chuckled, an eager, rich, gloating sound.

Fanny stared, clutching her letter, as Caroline Hughes’ mouth opened, as if to say a final word. But instead, her tongue emerged from her parted lips, stretching and pushing out like a squirming serpent. Blood ran over her tongue and down her chin, staining her chest. Two more arms sprouted from her ribs, one holding a curving scimitar, the other a severed head, blood dripping onto the carpet. From her ears dangled the heads of two snarling demons and around her neck, the string of pearls turned to a grisly chain of skulls. The wells of her eyes overflowed and washed her skin black.

Fanny drew one, two, three gut-wrenching breaths, and then screamed, a blood vessel bursting in her eye with the force of it.

* * *

Miss Caroline Hughes swept aside the mosquito netting for the breathless ayahs and Aides-de-Camp who came running at Fanny's cry. She slipped away down the corridor as they lifted Fanny's insensate form onto her bed. She retreated to the apartment where her trunks and boxes had already been collected. She paused to pen a quick note to Fanny before departing for the harbor where the Jupiter lay at anchor.

The note was in Hindustani. Fanny would be unable to resist the mystery of its contents and would seek out someone to read it to her. She would find little solace there.

Caroline Hughes blotted the parchment and folded it, addressing the missive with a flourish. No one could say any longer that her expression lacked for animation, or that her eyes lacked sparkle.