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SACRIFICE BY LINDSAY N MARSHALL

The sisters of Gamma Beta Pi long held that the goddess was a myth.

That their initiation ritual, the bloodletting under the cover of darkness in the woods behind their house one night in late October every year, was nothing more than simple tradition. That the magic they claimed to call forth, bringing beauty and power to those few worthy women, were nothing but empty affirmations.

But Marsha Hart knew the truth.

She heard the voice of the goddess whispering in her ear during her own initiation three years ago, moments before passing out among the twigs and leaves littering the forest floor. She saw her in a doe passing by their clearing, locking eyes with something more unearthly than an animal.

The words muttered, "More blood."

Thirty-six hours until this year's initiation, and all Gamma President Marsha Hart can think about while wandering North Florida U's campus is how she is going to supply the goddess with what she wants.

"You want to sacrifice an animal?" Alicia, her VP of Recruitment, said to her at lunch. A girl across the table choked on her meal.

Meanwhile Marsha didn't bat an eye as she scooped mac'n'cheese from her plate. "A rabbit or a mouse?" She shrugged, swallowing a bite. "Whatever we can find."

Now she hugs her books to her chest, crossing a street and stewing on the conversation. They think she's crazy; they all think she's crazy. But she knows the goddess is real, and the drips of blood from every initiate's palms are not enough to salivate her.

She's so in her head that she doesn't notice the bicyclist zipping through a stop sign until it's almost too late. He skids to a halt inches from her and she jumps, turning to face him with her middle finger ready.

"You'd make a nice hood ornament," the boy says. Because that's all he is, just a boy. Despite the broad shoulders and unkempt beard, he is nothing compared to her, goddess-blessed and glowing.

Still, the comment makes her blood boil. How dare he speak to her that way.

Until something around his neck catches her eye. A shark's tooth. A sign from the goddess herself that he's meant for more than this. Chosen, like she was.

She replaces her death glare with a flirtatious smile. Cocks her head.

"Tim Marsha."

She invites him to the Gamma house for dinner. The taxidermed body of a shark hanging from the wall seems to glare at him, but he pays it no mind.

He tells her his name, but she's not listening. Doesn't care. It won't be worth anything now. He's nothing more than a means to an end, a gift she intends to wrap with a bow. A sacrifice more willing and easy to catch than a rabbit or mouse.

"Who's your friend?" Alicia asks.

Marsha simply smiles, stabs a bit of steak, shoots him daggers with her eyes as she chews. He answers for her.

"We met outside the student union." He shovels mashed potatoes into his mouth like his life depends on it, not bothering to swallow before speaking again. "I almost ran her over with my bike." He laughs and bits of potato spray across his plate.

Marsha slices a chunk off her steak so hard the knife scrapes her plate with a grating sound. The boy jumps, but quickly settles himself and places his hand on her thigh. She knows he means to make her feel like a possession, but he doesn't know Marsha. She smiles at Alicia so hard her eyes squint. A question passes over her friend's face.

"I couldn't help but notice your necklace," Marsha says, turning to the boy and resting her hand on his chest. "Did you know sharks are our mascot?"

After dinner, she takes him to the strip, a string of bars facing campus across the four-lane road that runs through town. She buys him double shots of whiskey, while the bartender pours her ginger ale in a shot glass. The young woman behind the bar winks and Marsha smiles her thanks. She wonders if she's in a sorority too, working to pay her dues. She's pretty enough to be top tier, but not quite Gamma pretty.

The boy throws the shot back as soon as Marsha returns to where he waits on the dance floor. He laughs and wraps his hands around her waist as she swallows the ginger ale, feigning drinking with him.

"You are... so beautiful," he slurs, his hands tightening around the skin under her shirt.

"It's a gift," Marsha says. Goddess-given, she adds in her head.

Bodies pressed around them, music thumping, he leans in, his mouth open. Sloppy, Marsha thinks. She gives him her neck rather than her lips. He might be chosen, but she doesn't need to stoop quite so low as to kiss him back.

The next day, Marsha sits quietly in Gamma's living room. Legs crossed at the knee, a book in her lap. She turns the pages, but her mind is elsewhere.

Alicia trips over the edge of the rug as she rushes into the room. Out of breath, she hisses, "Marsha. Why is he in your room?"

"Where else was I supposed to keep him?"

"Keep him?" Alicia stutters. "What do you mean, 'keep him'? Was he here overnight?"

Marsha shrugs.

"You know boys aren't allowed in the house past dark. Or upstairs. And tonight is initiation."

Marsha shrugs again, but this time she can't keep the smile from her lips.

"Get rid of him before the house mom finds out."

"You won't tell."

"Of course I won't." A loyal second-in-command. Marsha's most trusted advisor. Even she would think this is crazy. "Just... get rid of him."

"Soon enough."

The boy opens his eyes, slow and groggy. Wearing nothing but boxers, his arms are splayed behind him, wrists fastened to the headboard with handcuffs.

"We must've had a good night..." he says as Marsha enters the room.

"You don't remember?" she asks, sitting on the edge of the bed and running her fingers through his hair. "We had the best night."

"My head is pounding."

"You had a lot to drink."

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"God," he says. "I slept with the President of Gamma Beta Pi and I was too drunk to remember it."

"Something like that."

She rises from the bed and walks toward the bedroom door.

"Hey," he says hesitantly, pulling on his restraints. "Are you gonna let me go?"

Marsha smiles at him, lingers for just a moment longer, and then closes the door behind her. From down the hall she can hear him yelling, but she doesn't turn back.

Three years ago, on a night just like this one, Marsha Hart passed out in the woods.

In the Chapter Room of the Gamma Beta Pi house, she donned a black dress—a floor-length thing, loose around her slim hips, that dragged through the dirt of the North Florida woods as the older sisters led the initiates through in the dead of night. The moon had looked almost red then, and sometime between looking eyes with a dose she swore spoke to her and spilling her own blood, she came to on a dirty forest floor.

It was humiliating.

She vowed then that her sisters would never view her as weak again. She was the best. She was chosen by the goddess. The only one who heard her voice through the trees, the lucky one briefly possessed by her power. This sorority, this goddess-given gift is hers to take. Nothing and no one can stand in her way.

Tonight, she will prove herself worthy. To her sisters and to the goddess herself. Tonight, she hopes the women of Gamma Beta Pi worship her. She hopes they fear her.

"Where have you been all day?" he shouts. "You left me here!"

"Calm down, you big baby," Marsha says, rolling her eyes. The new initiates are in the Chapter Room getting dressed, and the rest of the Executive Council is already in the woods preparing for the ritual. Marsha is dressed in her black cloak, fingernails painted black to match.

"Are you keeping me here as... some sort of sex slave?"

"We didn't even have sex last night," Marsha says. "I got you blackout drunk and tied you up. You're not deserving of me."

"What..." the boy sputters. "Then why am I here?"

"The goddess has plans for you."

"The what?"

Marsha leans down and unlocks the handcuffs on one of his wrists. Without missing a beat, he reaches his free hand out to swat at her, screaming loud enough to alert the girls in the Chapter Room in the attic. Marsha takes a step back and shakes her head.

"We can do this one of two ways. Either you come with me willingly, or I knock you out. If you fight it, we go with Option B."

"What are you doing with me, you crazy bitch?"

Marsha reaches forward and grabs his flailing wrist in both her hands, pinning it to the bed. She leans in close to his face, hatred pouring out of her, as she says, "Do not call me a bitch."

"You're... you're crazy!"

She attaches his free wrist to the one still chained to the bed, refusing to break eye contact as she does. "Option B it is."

Her fourth initiation, her body knows the way to the clearing in the woods on instinct. Guided by an invisible thread left by the goddess, pulling her in the right direction. It's silent barring the leaves crunching underfoot as they walk. The boy groans quietly behind her as she drags him by a chain looped through his handcuffs.

It took three whacks to the head with her paddle. "Big Isabella, Little Marsha" painted on it in bright pink. By the third swing, she feared she hit too hard, and had to check his pulse to make sure he was still alive. She couldn't sacrifice him if he was already dead.

Just barely alive, not enough to fight back, but heart still pumping blood.

The sound through the trees gets louder as she approaches, begging for that blood.

Soon enough, rows of girls in black dresses come into view past the tree line. They step aside to form an aisle for Marsha to walk through, making her way to the altar in the center.

Alicia stares, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. She breaks tradition to speak.

"What is he doing here?"

Marsha drops the leash-chain on the ground, and the boy slumps over. She places a crown of shark's teeth on her head, and each Exec member places a wooden neckpiece made to look like shark's jaws around their necks. They stand in silence for a few moments longer while they wait. Alicia stares at the boy crumpled on the ground in terror.

The new initiates make slightly more noise as they traipse through the woods for the first time. They don't know what to expect. Marsha remembers the mix of fear and excitement she felt the night of her initiation, but tonight she's not excited. Tonight she is fisted by nothing but a need for power and a desire to please her goddess, her face impassive and cold as the freshman girls are brought to the center of their circle surrounding the altar.

She lifts the ritual dagger high above her head as she announces, "You have all been chosen for initiation into Gamma Beta Pi. There is no higher honor among women. You have proven yourselves as worthy, and for that you should be proud. Tonight you will partake in our most sacred of rituals: shedding blood to become one with the sisterhood."

The girls huddled in a circle speak in hushed tones and look around, making eye contact with each other. The woods are dark and menacing, but tonight Marsha feels at home in them. For once confident in what she's about to do. Enjoying the heft of the dagger in her hand.

Some girls in the front point at the boy on the ground, whispering, questioning. Alicia, worst of all, hasn't removed her eyes from him. Yet Marsha ignores him for now. She ignores them all as she continues the ritual, passed down for nearly a hundred years.

"Tonight we celebrate this collective becoming one." Marsha places a golden bowl in the center of the small table in front of her and pricks her palm with the dagger. She watches the blood bubble to the surface for a moment, met by gasps from the initiates. She looks down at the blood and smiles slightly. Then she cuts deeper, a slice across the center of her palm until blood is rushing to the surface, and lets it drip into the bowl. "And as a sister, your blood shall mingle with ours."

The same words that were spoken to her three years ago, now coming out of her mouth. Words spoken by women long before her, and will continue to speak long after. She worked hard to get here, to earn her place at the top of the food chain. And it's almost time for the main event.

"Will the new initiates join me at the altar one at a time?"

The first girl steps forward. Elizabeth, her name is. Goes by Beth around the house. Marsha believed her too timid to join Gamma at first, but looks at her now to find the ice in her own eyes reflected back. A shark like the rest of them.

"Repeat after me: For beauty and youth."

"For beauty and youth," Beth echoes loudly. The sound reverberates in the woods. Marsha feels her first chill of excitement, but keeps her face impassive.

"For knowledge and power."

"For knowledge and power"

"And to never be afraid"

"And to never be afraid"

Marsha hands the dagger to Beth, neither girl breaking eye contact.

"Because the blood of my sisters is now my blood."

Beth swipes the blade across her palm without hesitating, her own blood dripping into the bowl with Marsha's. "Because the blood of my sisters is now my blood."

More blood, she hears echo from the woods around her. More blood, the trees seem to say.

"Did you hear that voice?" Marsha whispers to Alicia.

"What voice?" her second-in-command asks. "All I hear is the wind."

Marsha shakes her head and rolls her eyes. No one else is worthy. They wouldn't understand.

One by one, each initiate joins Marsha at the altar, dripping blood into the bowl until it overflows. Finally, she sets down the dagger and raises the bowl to the sky with both hands.

"We thank the goddess for blessing us," Marsha shouts, "and for the eternal perfection we have been given. We swear to never forget our own power."

Most of the sisters are unsure if the occult nature of their ritual is based in truth or theatrics, but Marsha was sure from her first night in the woods, when she felt the goddess's power flow through her so strongly that she fainted.

She sets the bowl down and slowly dips in two fingers, watching as it drips. She bends down to the boy on the ground and swipes her bloody fingers across his cheeks.

"As thanks, we offer you this sacrifice."

"Wait, you're not gonna kill him, are you?" Alicia says from behind her.

"Kill him?" a sister in the back shrieks. The newest sisters in the front glance among each other nervously, whispering. Was this supposed to happen? Should we stop it? I just wanted to go to frat parties, not witness a murder.

"We need his blood," Marsha hisses. "What don't you understand?"

With that, she picks the boy up by his head and slams it down onto the altar. She stabs him in the neck with the dagger, too quickly for anyone to stop her. Once the girls finally move, Marsha is already staring up at them with venom in her eyes, blood splattered on her face and cloak. Small flecks of red on the sharks' jaw around her neck. A pool so dark it's almost black encircling the boy's head, dripping rhythmically onto the leaves below.

Alicia shrieks and lunges for the dagger, a beat too late, and knocks Marsha to the ground. The sisters stare on, frozen in fear, as the friends struggle on the forest floor.

More blood, more blood, more blood, pounds in Marsha's head. More blood, as she sees a vein pulsing in her best friend's neck. The voice so loud she can't understand why no one else seems to hear it.

She stashes out and Alicia falls on top of her with a thud, dark blood gushing from the wound in her neck. Marsha shoves her lifeless body off of her and stands to find her sisters, old and new, staring at her in silence. More terror than she meant to instill. But somehow it feels right.

"You are all accessories to their deaths," Marsha says, bits of blood flying from her mouth. "And now you know what I'm capable of. If I can sacrifice her, I can sacrifice you to the goddess as well."

"The goddess isn't real..." a sister in the back starts, before Marsha picks up the dagger once more. Coated in her friend's blood. The silence returns.

A doe passes by their clearing, locking eyes with Marsha for a brief moment before moving on.

Rather than walk back toward the house with the rest of the sisters, Marsha follows the doe, wandering deeper into the woods alone, tossing off the crown and neckpiece and cloak until she's nude under the light of the full moon. She closes her eyes and swears she can hear a voice whispering to her through the trees that she did well.



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