

It had all started as a bit of harmless fun.

Those who partook in the ritual were a group of college students, members of a non-campus affiliated occult club. During their regular meetings, they frequently engaged in fake rituals, finding solace in the goal of being something bigger than themselves. All had been bullied, disowned, despised by their peers simply for being. Their gatherings gave them a sense of purpose, a place to belong in an otherwise unforgiving world.

Derrick had found the old book in a hidden section of the campus library, and checked it out on a whim. He thought it might make a neat prop for their club, bringing in some much appreciated authenticity. The text was all but indecipherable, even to Ben, a language major. Nothing any of them were familiar with even came close to allowing them to comprehend it. But, the runes were at least good for inspiration if nothing else.

None of them could have fathomed that the dark tome might actually contain real magic. It wasn't until one fateful afternoon gathering when the pages were inadvertently exposed to a tiny drop of blood from Jess's paper cut that the tome became something more.

It was Derrick who'd noticed it first. No sooner had the red droplet touched the pages than the book began to glow with an unnatural light he could not source. He picked it up, a brief tingle passing through his hand as he opened the tome. The book's foreign texts were suddenly legible as though written in English. One by one, each who was passed the book discovered they, too, could decipher the inscriptions.

Even stranger were the materials described in the text. Within its pages were a string of rituals whose purpose seemed to be to 'enhance human dealings in the mortal world.' It was everything they could have ever dreamed of and more!

Having some familiarity with magic rituals performed throughout the centuries by other cultures, the group set to work breaking down the steps they'd need to try the most simplistic spell. The ingredients called for only a small drop of blood from each member of their congregation present. The recipient of the spell would be a person of their choosing given only by name, and the target would simply fall over in an embarrassing situation once the spell was cast.

For their first experiment, they choose a colleague, Tammy, for whom their member Beth had been the subject of high school ridicule. Derrick led the chant, speaking the English words on the page out loud as they held hands in a circle.

“We humble truth-seekers beseech the guardian of dimensions, aid us in our quest for further glory, punish Tammy Fredette for her hindrance of our path!”

Though they knew the words on the page were written so they could understand them, Derrick’s incitation was another matter. He spoke the words as though fluent in the tongue the book was originally conceived in, further proof in their minds of the spell’s validity. A light glow befell the room, then nothing. The group sat in silence, waiting in vain for a further sign, some evidence that what they’d witnessed was not an illusion. They soon departed for the evening, heads hung low in disappointment.

It was Beth who called them together again two days later. She had seen it herself; her nemesis had fallen before her and dozens of others on the campus quad. The scene had been stripped from a movie; Tammy had tripped over a crack in the sidewalk, fell face down into a puddle, spilling her books everywhere. She had been extremely embarrassed but otherwise unharmed; no one in their group wished to abuse anyone.

Yet, despite the evidence before them, the group concluded it was a fluke. There was no way they’d stumbled upon real magic, right? Even so, their desire to continue their studies of the book did not waiver. They were determined to keep trying the inscribed spells, if for no other reason than to prove they were hoaxes.

With each excursion into the book’s secrets, the group found more and more reason to believe they had stumbled upon actual magic. Teachers they’d cursed fell ill for days at a time, delaying tests and papers. Their sexual exploits became more fruitful as even the most out-of-reach partners seemed readily available. Debts and bills seemed suddenly forgotten, as though they’d never existed. They finally felt as though their lot in life was changing, that they’d be given what they deserved all their lives in the face of an unfair world.

With each ritual, they felt their power increase, and in turn desired to do more. They studied the tome meticulously, looking for some drawback, some consequences to their actions. They found none and continued with their fun unimpeded.

It was then they discovered the final ritual hidden in the back of the book, the one that all their efforts had evidently been leading up to. The book spoke of a being who existed in neither heaven nor hell, that would grant untold power to those who allowed him to grace their plane of existence. It had no name; it did not seem to exist in any other reference material they had access to. Yet it did not seem to be a malicious being; it had granted them many advantages already, and only asked for a momentary release to grant the faithful even more blessings. The tome made it quite evident that it could not exist in this world for long. What harm could it possibly do?

They debated for long hours; surely such a creature could not exist, but if it did, it was only logical that they take the next step. Summoning it would surely grant them even more power, wouldn't it? They took their time, ascertained the risks, and studied the tome thoroughly before taking that final step to greater power.

After months and months of indecision, they gathered one final time in the now vacant library, eight of their number, to attempt the final rite that would unlock the secrets of the tome they'd so carefully mastered. The ritual called for a carved insignia in the ground, a ritual chant, and a small bodily sacrifice from each of them. Bloodletting had been common among the requirements of the rituals; it was of no consequence to each as they, in turn, passed around a knife to slide down the palm of their hands.

They were garbed in standard clothes; their familiarity with each other and the prerequisite of only their presence did not necessitate the presence of ritualistic robes. They stood around each other in a circle, hands linked as displayed in the ritual, blood dripping from each of their slashed hands into the insignia carved below them.

Derrick began the chant, as he'd always done. Once again, though he knew he spoke the words in English, the others heard only the unrecognizable dialect found originally in the tome.

“Oh great protector of dimensions, we give unto you our bodies and souls as an offering, that you may descend upon this world and grant your humble followers their deepest desires!”

As had happened in the past, a glow descended upon them in turn, rapidly changing colors across every end of the spectrum. It was working! Each one felt a certain sense of elation. They were about to receive a blessing that no other mortal had received in recorded history. Their hearts beat faster, as if in unison. The anticipation in the air was almost palpable.

The room went silent, light fading. Something was wrong. The colorful display had indicated that surely, something had come from the ritual. Yet there was nothing to be seen. Could their new master have been awakened somewhere else?

Derrick went to release the hands of those beside him, to tell them to spread out and look around for a sign. However, he couldn't. Somehow, he couldn't let go of his grip on the hands of the members beside him.

Derrick suddenly felt a sharp pain in his head, as though the inside of his skull was on fire. He screamed in agony, frightening his friends, who had each one by one discovered they were

unable to release each other from their neighbor's grasps. Each tried in vain to let go, to run, but all were frozen by the arm's length distance between them.

Derrick gasped, feeling red hot lances of pain force through the base of his skull. Thick black blood poured down his face as two massive horns burst forth, growing upwards from his head and curling upwards. His hair fell away from his scalp in clumps as the growths continued their upward journey. His forehead also began to swell, as though to match the progress of the protrusions from his skull. He was desperate to reach up and touch them, rub them, do anything to relieve the pain. But his hands were bound to Jess and Ben on either side of him.

His jaw cracked forward next, blood spewing everywhere as his teeth fell to the ground. Sharp needles pierced his gums, and he realized with horror that new teeth were taking their place, much larger, more predatory. He felt two small lumps fall from the sides of his head; in horror, he glanced down to see the remnants of his outer ears shed like dead skin. His nostrils had stretched and merged with his upper growing lip, taking in air, desperate for anything to cool the burning flames eating at his body.

His cries became more feral, more bestial as the changes surged onwards. His entire body burned with the fires of hell as muscle tore and reconfigured, straining against the remnants of his clothing. Everything felt tight; not just his garments but the very skin covering his flesh felt as though it was about to tear apart from the strain. Derrick was desperate to fight back, to try to hold out against the forces that ravaged his body. But, he was as helpless as an observer against the onslaught of transformation.

His entire body began to shake and grow, skin being stretched and torn, revealing thicker, black-scaled hide beneath. Two unnatural growths of bone began poking at the flesh above his shoulder blades, threatening to burst through as the horrific transformation crawled ever onward. His arms and legs began to lose definition, withering and shirking in contrast to his ever-increasing bulk. His neck surged forward, thickening with new muscle while lances of pain prickled along his neck and back, adorning his body with deadly spines.

The pain then centered in his tailbone. His ass ached as something trapped within desperately tried tearing its way into existence. With a loud snap, his jeans and underwear gave way, birthing a thick reptilian tail already covered in the telltale black scales, as it grew thicker and long to match the trunk of his body. With a sudden shock, he realized he was able to feel the ground below him with the rapidly growing alien appendage.

So engrossed with the horrific display before her, Jess barely noticed the tugging on her arm and the burning sensation that slowly spread from her wrist and up her arm towards her shoulders

and neck. She looked in terror, seeing that it was Derrick's arms, or what used to be his limbs, were rapidly losing their musculature and beginning to collapse, retreating into his expanding trunk and taking her along with them. She looked across to see the same thing happening to Ben, who was fused to Derrick's left side. He, too, screamed in horror as he realized he was being pulled inward towards their transforming friend.

Jess's hand burned as it reached even closer to Derrick's shifting flesh. She cried in terror, her fate unknown. Would she transform like her friend? What did she do to deserve this?! She screamed in desperation, tried to pull away, but was powerless against the force that drew her ever closer to her impending fate.

The distance between her and the trunk of the beast that was formerly her friend Derrick drew ever smaller as his body grew ever larger. Jess felt the burning sensation travel up her arm; she screamed at the intensity, begging it to stop. She felt as though her arm were literally melting as it touched the burning scaled hide of the monster before her. The pain burned away all resistance she had. Weakened, she could only slump over as her body began to press into her former friend's, screams replaced with growls and snarls as her head too began to reshape.

Her lovely hair, the hair she'd always so meticulously groomed to perfection, fell uselessly to the floor in clumps along with the skin of her outer ears. She lost all feeling in her body as her form was literally sucked away into the creature's bulk, seeming only to be used as fuel to power its onward transformation. What little sensation she retained centered in her head and neck as it rose ever upwards, beginning to match the head of her former leader. Her neck stretched and cracked as her jaw was forced outwards, hundreds of sharp daggers filling her maw as it too grew massive. A mirror of her fate was reflected in Ben, who was undergoing a simultaneous transfiguration on the creature's opposite side. The last of her tears dried up as her eyes burned, iris glowing deep crimson as she lost even the ability to cry.

Nathen watched in horror as the changes overcame his sister Jess. He wept in agony, knowing that she was lost to him, that he'd be next, that he could not escape this cruel fate. They'd only been trying to change their lot in an unfair world, as anyone would have done in their place! Had they known, they would never have touched that accursed book.

Nathen looked over at Beth; she would be next to join the horrific monstrosity along with him. Her eyes conveyed only regret, despair. She, too, knew there was no escape. Bracing herself for the pain, she, too, felt the first touch of her flesh burning into the form of the beast before her.

By this time, Derrick's former body bore little resemblance to the human he'd once been. Now armless, his shoulder blades had rotated backward and given birth to what could only be

described as wings that grew and stretched impossibly long over his back, unnaturally strong as they would need to be to carry a beast of his size airborne. His tail was now as thick as his trunk, as his stubbly legs hung vestigial, rapidly fading into the thick scales of his former stomach, giving him a serpentine form.

The final three watched their fates unfold before them as two more of their cohorts screamed in agony, flesh fusing with the monsters, skin being torn away as their necks stretched, faces warped and grew horns and vicious reptilian snouts. The changes were speeding up now; with each new addition, the creature grew in bulk, quickly morphing the remaining hosts to suit its growing needs. The beast would soon outgrow the circle it had been summoned in; already its massive tail stretched out to the opposite corner of the room while Derrick's original head threatened to touch the opposite window with his snout. Its wings stretched ever longer, spindly fingers ripping out of the creature's back and shoulders, thin membranes stretching between each, enveloping the remaining humans under a dark blanket of despair.

Only one of their number, a young man named Kevin, waited in rapture at the thought of being joined to the magnificent beast that now dominated much of the room. He was last in line to be taken into its hide, pulled from both directions towards the center of the beast. Observing all the while, he regarded the others completing their changes, faces barely recognizable as they reshaped to become feral, hungry. Powerful. He longed to feel that power only such a beast could possess, to take vengeance upon the world that had treated him so cruelly. His anticipation was rewarded by searing agony as he, too, began to merge, feeling only pain and dysphoria, not at all as he'd been hoping. His mind, too, fell into despair as he realized his fate, as that of the others, was only to be a vessel for something not of this earth, something they could never have dominion over.

By now the center creature was massive, towering over the circle which had allowed it into the world. The last of the tiny humans was dwarfed by its bulk, as the merging heads and necks slowly migrated upwards and began to expand rapidly to match the already writhing heads of their former fellows. Slowly, each head lost control of its motor functions as it solidified its position in the whole of the creature, giving way to the will of the extra dimensional being that had evidently crossed over to use their forms as host for its own needs.

Slowly, the beast arose, dark wings spreading as its many heads observed its new domain. Each head retained the memories of its former host, but each could do nothing in the face of the instincts of the beast that now dominated their combined form. Slowly their thoughts, their internal screams of torment were torn away as the beast's influence began to purge their individual consciousness away before setting itself to task.

The beast granted them one last bit of revelation before silencing their many voices in its head. Each ritual in the book had been a stepping stone, allowing a bit of the beast's power to enter their realm. The beast had slowly warped their desires, making them crave more and more until they had no choice but to perform the final needed ritual. Each of their selfish wishes had only served in the end to power its cause. Each one of them, in their last moments of consciousness, was forced to suffer the guilt that their selfishness would eventually lead to the ruin of their world as the beast burst through the roof of the library, ready to devour all that stood in its way.