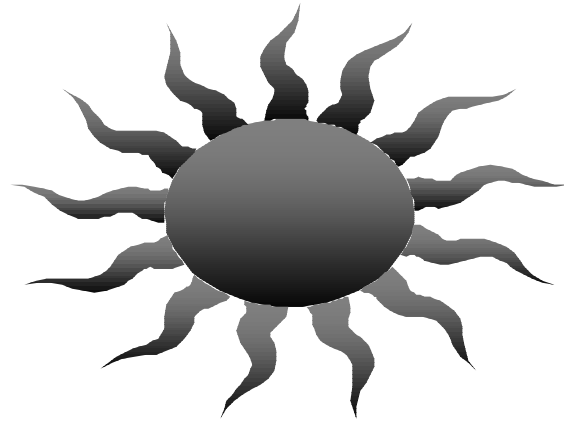


Peace and  
Servitude.



*Joseph Curtis.*

*“And Yea it came to pass that in the time of darkness, after the evil that had infested man boiled up inside of him overflowing and destroying the world, our savior was born among men. Among the wicked he walked and he brought them into the light and taught them the new lore, the evils must be left behind and only the power be wielded by those truly ordained in the glory of the celestial being our Lord all mighty! And yea, he delivered the righteous from the clutches of evil and into the glorious peace and servitude of the celestial being”.*

The man in the white robe trimmed with gold and curling embroidery now looked up from the old and tattered book resting upon a plinth, from which he was reading and surveyed the crowd which had gathered before him under the great vaulted roof of the holy celestial temple. He could see the people flinch when his eyes passed over them as he scanned and faint smile crept across his lips. Suddenly he shouted “Do you still follow the light and walk in servitude of the celestial being?” As if on cue the masses leaped up in their seats and shouted in return “Peace and servitude, we walk in the light of the celestial being forever!”. The robed figure touched a button on the underside of the plinth and in a flash of light was gone, a moment later a booming voice resounded above the awed rabble of the crowd. “Return children of the High celestial being, may you walk in peace and servitude”. The doors of the temple then automatically opened and the harsh noon sunlight streamed in from the street and people began to exit.

As the high priest Varen closed the secret door in the floor of the podium he frowned and walked along the passage way to the priests lounge.

“High Priest Haeln” he said as he entered the richly and lavishly decorated priests lounge and received a goblet of wine from a sparsely attired serving girl.

“Varen, you’ve been around the people too much” Haeln chuckled “There is no need to use my title here, call me Haeln”.

Varen nodded and continued.

“Look, the people seemed less interested today than before, I think that we need to order a few more examples, you understand.

We can’t be growing lax in our efforts even if there has been no riots in seven years”.

Haeln nodded “I understand completely, can never be too careful, I’ll get Jaem right on it”.

Haeln started for the exit of the lounge, Varen got up from the plush red velvet recliner he had been sitting in and said “Wait, I have had my eye on someone for a while and I think he’d be perfect, he wasn’t at service today”.

Haeln jerked his head around at that and replied “Wasn’t at service, hmmm yes what is his name, we haven’t had a decent Example in a while, I think the people will enjoy it” he smiled sadistically and chuckled .

Varen also smiled, “Aiden was his name”, “See you at the Example”.

With that Haeln turned on his heel and left. Varen sipped his wine, leaned back in his chair and smiled, he was going to enjoy this one.

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While the rest of the village attended the Service and the streets were empty Aiden was in a dark corner in the back of his families barn.

He had never thought of ever missing a Service, normally but that was before he found it.

He had found it three days ago while he was plowing a field of his farm, a small silver object half sticking out of the newly furrowed soil.

He had picked it up and should've reported it immediately to a priest, they were always after things from before, when the evil had tainted the earth and men fought and destroyed each other for greed, but something about it's smooth metallic surface made him want it.

Aiden had waited for Serviceday before daring to remove it from under the loose floorboard in his room where it was hidden, it was the only time he knew it would be safe to examine it, with everyone at Service and no priests about.

While everyone was getting ready for Service, he had slipped away in the confusion to the barn to wait.

And now he was here the round silvery object on the bench in front of him. He held it up to the light and the surface gleamed dully almost glowing, he felt the smooth contours around the edges and the faces with an engraved pattern and a faint inscription in a bizarre text that he couldn't make out, from Before.

Such beauty, yet he knew as well as anyone it contained such evil underneath, when man started to make these things,

objects of great beauty and power he began to lust for more and the greed consumed all but a few of the entire of mankind.

Aiden shuddered to think, the Teachings were so vivid.

When he thought about it he recoiled and dropped the object in horror.

It fell gracefully arcing, when it hit the rough wooden surface of the bench an unseen contact on the edge was depressed and the device sprung open.

What he saw inside was one of the most beautiful sites he had ever beheld, there was a smooth dull glowing face with strange gold inscriptions running in a circle around the outside edge of the face and in the center were three strange shafts pointing from the center of the face to the glowing inscriptions around the edge.

Each shaft was larger than the previous one and the longest thinnest one glides smoothly, rotating around the center at a constant pace.

*Thud, Thud, Thud!*

He had become so engrossed in looking at the wondrous object from Before he hadn't noticed the shouting and men running through the village.

He peered out the barn window, with a clear view of the front of the small cottage in which his family lived.

What he saw turned his blood cold, there were a group of six soldiers in full armor, breastplates emblazoned with the symbol of a fist in front of a radiant sun, the Supreme High Priest's personal guard and a tall figure in a long white robe with gold embroidery leading them.

It was the robed figure who was now banging on his door.

“Open up Aiden, now! We know you’re in there and we just want to talk”.

*“Holy shit! Somehow they must’ve found out about the object, they are going to make an Example of me”.*

Aiden quickly ran to his room and hid the item in its loose board and made a dash for the rear door to the cottage.

When he burst out into the sunlight his heart jumped into his mouth.

Another six soldiers guarded the back door, one of them grabbed him roughly and dragged him around to the front.

As he rounded the corner the priest walked up to him and said “Well, well Aiden you have been bad and we might have to make an Example of you”.

When Aiden heard that he shuddered, when he was a child there was an Example.

They took him into the village square and hung him upside down then they beat him with a cat o’ nine tails until blood was streaming from his back.

Then even worse, they took him away into the temple.

When the priests took men into the temple they rarely come out again, and if they do, they just babble incoherently in madness and just wither away until they die in weeks usually. The longest anyone had lasted afterwards was almost 2 months.

Aiden didn’t know what went on inside, but the bloodcurdling screams at night for the next week made him not ever want to.

“Missing out on Service and now running away from a priest, whatever for? We are your friends, you needn’t run from us, I think you’re trying to hide something.”.

The priest turned to one of the soldiers that had found him, “Karth, you and your men search the house, he’s hiding something and I want it, GO!”.

With that the six soldiers, one of them carrying a bizarre elongated object, scurried off into the house leaving only the original six to guard him.

The priest pulled a long silver tube with a handle from beneath his robes, “Goodnight Aiden and lets hope for your sake that they find nothing!” he pulled a small switch on the side of the handle and there was a loud bang, Aiden felt a sharp pain in his side, the world faded and there was no more.

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When he came to he was being dragged forcefully by his arms by two of the guards that had discovered him and there was a faint humming in his ears.

He looked up, shining breastplates which bore the symbol of the supreme high priest.

It was then that he realized that the sound in his ears wasn’t humming at all, it was cheering.

Aiden looked around quickly and what he saw terrified him.

He was being dragged down the main street towards the town square.

The square was lined with all of the people in the village, as was the street, and they were all chanting and screaming, throwing rocks and rotten fruit at him.

*“Death to him, Evil! He is a demon from hell come to destroy us, a resurrected monster from Before come to swallow us up in his wickedness”.*

When he heard that voice, he spun his head around. His own parents on the side of the road, chanting and yelling like the others. His father drew his arm back and hurled a rotten tomato, it hit him square in the face. He felt betrayed and totally alone, his own parents, turned against him. By now he had arrived at the main village square, the place where the weekly markets were held and where he had played as a child, running around the giant oak tree that stood at its center, that had stood since Before, some say. But now it had another purpose, a far more foreboding and evil. A rope had been hung off one of the lower branches and now it dangled down, with a loop at one end it looked decidedly sinister, being blown randomly in the wind. The screams and chants were louder now, with the people all around the square and now they had filled in the gap through which he had been dragged from the street, so they completely surrounded him. No chance of escape, he chuckled to himself, even if he managed to get away from the guards the mob would be on him in a minute and they wanted blood. The Supreme High Priest then emerged from the front double doors of the temple which stood at the far end of the square. He raised both his hands and the roar of the crowd abruptly ceased. Then he just stood there for a minute, arms up with his fully golden robe emblazoned with the fist and the sun, the symbol of the Supreme High Priest waving in the slight breeze that

flowed through the square, the large gold fist that hung around his neck on a thick gold chain was glinting in the afternoon sun. When he lowered his arms he began to speak in a deep voice that seemed to come from everywhere at once. "My people, it is a sad day into which I emerge now. One of our number has strayed from the eternal light of the Supreme Celestial Being and has fallen into darkness and evil. He has not gone to Service but instead was found trying to conjure up the devil with an artifact from Before. With that he pulled something from underneath his gold flowing robe and held it up. Aiden saw it and gasped, it was the object that he had found in the field, the same one that he had hidden under the floorboard in his room earlier that day. *How had they found it, nobody knew about that hole.* As the Supreme High Priest held it up it glinted in the light and Aiden could see that it was still open and the little shafts were still going around and around in front of the inscriptions. The crowd stared in hushed amazement at this site *It's so beautiful, I must touch it, I must!* Aiden struggled free from his guards and ran towards the device in the hands of the Supreme High Priest. *Touch it, you must have it.* Suddenly he was knocked down harshly by the guards, they had caught up with him and now two more came to surround and subdue him. "See how much he wants it, his devil's tool". The Supreme High Priest spat.

He walked over to where Aiden was being held by the four guards, punched him in the face and whispered, "I'll see you shortly".

With that the priest shouted "Do it!" and strode back into the Temple, the doors closing behind him with a resounding boom.

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After the temple doors closed the crowd erupted with a renewed fervor into screaming insults and shouting for blood. Aiden was dragged by his four guards into the center of the village square.

To where the long sinister looking rope was hanging from one of the lower branches of the great oak that's overhanging leaves shelter most of the square beneath it.

His feet were looped in the end of the rope and was hauled up, hanging a few feet above the ground upside down.

Two priests, white robes flowing in the wind emerged from the crowd carrying long whips with many tails at the end.

Attached to the tails at various points were sharpened metal spikes, gleaming dully in the afternoon sun.

Aiden knew what was to come, he had witnessed it as a child and now it was going to happen to him, he couldn't believe it was happening.

As the priests drew near, in desperation he shouted out "I walk in the light of the great Celestial Being! Peace and servitude!".

"Daemon! We will beat you all the harder for such blasphemy! Do not talk again or you will find yourself less a tongue!".

With that they started to lash him, without mercy.

Each whip of the tails felt like a red hot poker being pressed against his back.

Again and again the spikes dug in and as the whip pulled away for another blow, the flesh to departed, flying in a stream of blood, ripped raw from the bone.

As he hung, blood dripping down his face, in his eyes, the pain of the raw flesh being ripped off his back Aiden wanted to die, but he knew he wouldn't yet.

Whatever the priests had in store for him would make this seem like a picnic.

The pain came to a climax and the red in front of his eyes faded to black, he could still feel the blood dripping, taste it in his mouth, that was the last thing he remembered, the taste of his own blood.

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Aiden awoke with a start, he had been dreaming that he was at home with his family but as he looked around he quickly saw that it was just a dream and nothing more.

He was enveloped in darkness, lying on cold hard stone, one of the cells in the temple dungeon he assumed if there were such a thing.

Aiden tentatively touched his back and recoiled in sheer disbelief.

It was normal, as if the intense lashing he had just received had never happened at all.

How long had he been in here, it cant have been very long but how had his back healed so quickly?

With that the opposite end of the cell rumbled open and a stream of harsh white light filled the room.

Aiden blinked and shaded his eyes as a dark silhouette filled the doorway, hunched menacingly over.

“You will come with me now” the shape said in a deep growling voice as if there was no question of the command being obeyed.

He stood up and followed the man out of the room and into a brightly lit corridor, although Aiden couldn't quite discern how it was done for there were no sconces, just bare off-white walls.

He followed the hunched figure through countless passages and around winding turns.

*This place is a maze, I'll never get out of here alive.*

Finally they arrived to a larger chamber, set into the opposite side were a pair of large oak doors however they possessed no handles of any type.

To his disbelief the doors started to open inwards by themselves, the man hurried forward and motioned for him to follow.

Inside the room there were two chairs, one with metal straps to fasten around the legs, arms and chest, and a regular wooden chair.

Aiden guessed that he would be occupying the former.

As if on cue two men who must've been hiding on either side behind the double doors, sprung out, grabbed him and wrestled him into the chair.

The straps tightened by themselves and he was stuck fast, unable to move a muscle.

The hunched figure and the two men then left the room and the doors closed, again moving by themselves.

Alone, Aiden studied the room about him, which didn't take long.

It was just a bare room, about 20 paces long and 10 wide, the walls were bare, off-white and again the light seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once.

Bizarre.

He was pondering the mysteries of the room when suddenly a section of the wall seemingly the same as the other walls, whizzed back to reveal the Supreme High Priest of the Holy Temple of the Celestial Being.

As the priest stepped in the “door” slid back and again became part of the wall, without leaving a mark.

“I know we've met before but let me introduce myself, I am Deowyn, Supreme High Priest of....”.

Aiden cut him off, “I know who you are! What's going on? How are you going to torture me without any tools?”.

The High Priest smiled, “Torture you, why we don't want to do that, we just want to know how much you know”.

Aiden looked confused, “How much I know, about what, I don't....”.

“Silence!”, Deowyn shouted and pulled the silver device out of his robes, “Perhaps you recognize this?”.

His smile was sincere but his voice was as menacing as ever.

“Well yes, I found it in the field last week”, Aiden said.

The High Priest's smile crept a little wider, “Last week, why did you not report it to a priest earlier, why conceal it?”.

“I, I was going to, I mean I wasn't hiding it!”, he stammered.

“Wasn’t hiding it, it was under a floorboard in your room, is that where you keep everything that isn’t yours?”  
“But I...” Aiden began.  
“You’re hiding something and I want to know what it is. Now I’ve tried to be fair but still you insult me with your impudence! Now for the last time, tell me why you hide it!”, Deowyn’s voice had risen to a shout.  
Aiden was shaking with terror, “I didn’t hi.....”.  
“Enough! I was hoping I wouldn’t have to resort to this, however since you’re being especially stubborn.”  
The Supreme High Priest pulled another device out of his robes, it was a small black box with two wires protruding from it, one red and one black, each ending with a small suction cap. He stuck the red suction cap to Aiden’s left temple and the black one to his own.  
“What is it?”  
“It is a device from Before”, Aiden gasped, Deowyn continued “We don’t know how it works but it allows me to see directly inside your head and discover what you are hiding from me. It has some side effects though, all the people we’ve tested it on so far have either died or become quite insane.”  
“No, you can’t, I will never let you” Aiden shouted.  
“I wouldn’t try to resist it I were you, we have found that the madness is less severe the less you resist and indeed death only ensues with the most resistance. Now shall we begin?”  
Deowyn touched a small contact on the side of the box and nothing happened, or so it seemed.  
Almost immediately a voice said “*Hello Aiden, I think now we shall begin*”, it was the High Priest but his lips did not move.

“*Why were you hiding the device? Tell me now!*”, Aiden felt a compulsion to speak, but he did not know.  
“I don’t know! I told you”  
“*Don’t resist, it will only lead to your death! What does the device do, you know*”, Aiden didn’t know.  
“I don’t know anything about the device, I found it in the field, I told you!”  
Instantly it felt as if his head was being crushed, squeezed from both sides by an invisible and indestructible force.  
He screamed, the pain was so unbearable.  
“*You know! NOW TELL!*”  
The vice grip on his head compressed heavier on his brain. The voice of Deowyn inside his head echoed in his skull, he wanted to tell, but because he didn’t know his brain was resisting, it was all he could do, so he resisted.  
Again the clamp on his head drew tighter around his skull, so tight that he thought at any moment his head would be crushed and he would die, but he resisted still, his screams growing louder.  
Grey smoke began to drift out from the black device that Deowyn held and beads of sweat were streaming down the Supreme High Priest’s face.  
“*Do not resist*”, Deowyn’s voice sounded strained now, struggling to quell Aiden’s resistance.  
He resisted more and now thick black smoke was pouring out of the box.  
The pressure on his skull grew less and less as more smoke poured out of the device.  
Now the resistance grew easier and easier.

The priest became more and more strained the more he resisted and suddenly *BOOM!* The black device exploded in a shower of sparks, debris flying around the room, bouncing off the walls.

Deowyn collapsed on the floor panting, sweat covering his face and his robes stained and burned from the explosion.

He looked up, straight into the smiling face of Aiden, unscathed by the explosion.

The restraints of the chair lay twisted and broken on the floor amongst the remains of the black device.

“But how did you?”, Deowyn began.

*“Silence Fool! Aha, now it is your turn to tell the truth.”*

Now Deowyn, not Aiden felt the intense pressure descend upon his skull, the intense pain making him writhe helplessly on the floor in agony.

“But, it’s not possible, how could this happen?”, Deowyn stammered.

*“You yourself said the working of this device was unknown, and now it appears that your ignorance is your downfall, muhahahaha!”*

Aiden’s sadistic laugh echoed throughout his skull for what seemed like forever.

*“NOW, tell me the truth, the entire truth! Why have you deceived the human race with your pitiful party tricks?”*

Deowyn gulped, the History was passed on from one generation of priests to the next, how the time of darkness came to be and the secrets of the priests.

“Before the time of darkness, humanity was vast and people covered every corner of the globe, there came a time of civil unrest and a newly developed technology to allow humans to

communicate through thought was turned into the deadliest weapon that man had ever developed. It could instantly turn someone mad. One of the weapons was released and almost the entire of the human race was destroyed, not to mention the technology, so much was lost. Some of those who had developed the technology remained and vowed to never let it happen again, they became the first Priests. At that time society had denigrated into a barbaric culture, most of the people were mad. The Priests led by our Savior, the High Priest used the little technology they had left to help cure as many people as they could of the madness and also to make sure that humans never developed advanced technology again. That is why anyone who has anything to do with technology is made an Example of and we used the black device to find out where they got it from, so we can get it because we have lost so much but it usually just sends them mad. You’re ancestors were obviously not Stunted enough, but we will soon fix that wont we ahahaha!”.

Deowyn cackled maniacally as he pressed a button on his gold fist and the doors flew open.

10 fully armed Supreme guards ran in, swords at the ready, however they never got a chance to use them.

As soon as they rushed into the room they collapsed to the floor writhing, screaming and clawing wildly at their skulls.

“What? What’s going on, my guards”.

With that Deowyn rose screaming into the air, convulsing wildly.

*“Now I see that the evil that has consumed our land now is greater than any evil that came Before and must not be allowed*

*to continue. And so I must cleanse the Earth and purge it of all wickedness!”*

Deowyn rose even higher into the air and gasped, “No.” Aiden’s laughing face was the last thing that he ever saw because at that moment he and the guards violently exploded, sending a bloody shower of flesh and bone in all directions, painting the white walls, red and ending the era of covert oppression and slavery in the guise of *peace and servitude*.

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As sun rose over the blackened and charred ruins where the village once stood, corpses strewn, there was only one thing that still stood. The giant oak that once was surrounded by a great evil was now free, leaves majestically blowing in the crisp morning breeze.

## The End.