

After

The man stood alone in the center of a dark copse of aged oaks. In the course of the few openings in the jade vegetation above, he could tell that his near dark surroundings were, in fact, a small pocket of night in the midst of a brighter day.

A brighter day that was far-flung from this place.

What modest light there was, he drew on deftly. His eyes surveyed his temporary prison—or was it his sanctuary—he couldn't be certain at the moment. What he did know is that he was looking for something; he wasn't exactly sure what that "thing" was, but his darting eyes took care not to leave anything unexamined.

He stood in a ring of sorts, formed by the surrounding trees. The ring was made of nothing but pure emerald grassland, or so it seemed to his restricted vision. It extended a good thirty-five feet from the hub in all directions. He couldn't be sure of the precise measurements, but he knew, almost certainly, that this was a perfect circle. What was more, and he was a bit surprised that he hadn't noticed something so plainly obvious before; he was directly at the heart of it.

He took a moment to puzzle at the lack of light on what appeared to be a very cheerful day. He paused momentarily at that thought. When he imagined the day might be "cheerful" his mind almost recoiled at the idea. He filed that away for later examination and went back to the trees. Despite the relatively substantial clearing he was standing in, the trees seemed to stretch to their limits to shield this place from the sun. The trees weren't very tall. It was a marvel that their branches could reach such a distance without snapping from their own weight.

The man wondered if this place was a haven for demons and witchcraft, or perhaps just something the Devil constructed in his spare time. He quickly realized the irony of the situation. He had no idea who he was—although that hadn't really occurred to him until now. *For all I know*, he thought wryly, *I may just be the Devil*

himself. After all, here I am, in the middle of a dark forest, in the dead center of what can only be an unnaturally occurring circle carved from the core of the woods surrounding me. If it wasn't done by me, then I hope that I am the Devil--at least then I have a good chance of being the scariest thing I see today.

At this point he became intensely aware that someone was staring at him. A quick glance around revealed nothing, but the sensation persisted. Becoming self-conscious at the notion of some unseen spectator, he gave himself the once over. Not for the first time since he became “aware”, he was shocked by what he found; it wouldn't be the last time. His body, and he could see all of it as he was exposed from head to toe, was covered in cuts and scars. Some of them were healed and pale, yet many more were freshly caked with blood and dirt.

Yes, he told himself, I believe I am at the very least the Devil.

Before he could consider his situation further an old woman appeared near the edge of the ring. She was like something out of a child's campfire story. Her hair was long, ragged, gray and obviously brittle. Her yellow eyes darted about like a wild animal—not predator, but prey. The way she shuffled meekly toward him only added to her apparent dilapidation. He almost let himself hope that this was some misguided beggar woman who had wandered too far off the path.

Suddenly he realized that she had reached his location. Had she really been shuffling along? Perhaps not, if she'd made it to him so quickly. It took him another moment to notice that her eyes were no longer searching for anything. They rested calmly on him, all indication of fear or apprehension evaporated. She stood there, waiting. But waiting for what? Did he know her? Did he know her name? Was he being rude? He determined he should at least say hello, but as he opened his mouth he was interrupted by the woman's own voice instead.

“You have but one wish left.” The voice was strong and authoritative, yet not overbearing. All things concerning this woman seemed to contradict his

preconceptions. “Use it wisely,” she continued, “for there can be no reversals... only regrets.”

The man puzzled at these cryptic words. *One wish left? I don't even know what my first wishes were... or how many wishes I started with for that matter. Perhaps my last wish was to become the Devil, he thought wryly. In that case I had better not wish myself human; I could wholly annoy myself when I remember exactly who it is that I am. I seriously doubt she can offer me a wish at all, but since I am covered in scars in the middle of the forest with an old hag bearing gifts... and since I really don't know exactly how skeptical I tend to be—I suppose I could at least play along.*

The woman never blinked, never stirred; she moved not an inch while he was thinking to himself. She just stared at him with those cool eyes and waited. She seemed both on the threshold of reminding him of his wish, and also as if she had reminded him a hundred times already, like an enduring grandmother. He just stared back for a moment thinking of all the things he wanted to know. How many wishes had he made? Where was he? How did he get all these scars? Who the hell was he in the first place?! He settled for the simple question first.

“Tell me,” he began, “how many wishes did I start with?”

She raised her hand in a deliberate motion. The small upturn at the corners of her mouth suggested that this question had been anticipated and she wasn't going to miss her opportunity at bravado. She brandished three fingers in front of him and spoke. “You began with these wishes,” she indicated the outstretched digits. He wanted to ask her what those wishes were, but she was prepared for that as well. She continued, “This wish,” she said curling one finger to her palm, “was used for knowledge. This wish, too,” another finger retreated away, “was used for knowledge. This wish,” she wagged the last finger in front of the man to emphasize her words, “will *also* be used for knowledge.”

“Great,” he grinned glibly, “just what I wanted to know.”

She echoed his smile, “Have patience nameless one. Do not overlook the value of ignorance. Soon you will know more than you can handle. Being in the dark...” at this she laughed a bit at the obvious pun, “...isn’t always as bad as it seems.”

He was quickly becoming annoyed at this cryptic little lady, but he wasn’t sure how dangerous she could be if equally annoyed. It was because of this that he decided to take the bait. “Fine,” he played along, “if you have a wish reserved for me, then I would at least like to know who I am. If I am to wish for anything, then I wish to regain my memory. All of my questions will be easily answered by my own mind and I can avoid another string of riddles from you.” He all but spat the last word at her and hoped he wouldn’t regret it.

If the woman noticed his rebuke she ignored it merely nodding at his words, as if this was also expected, and told him, “All you must do is make the wish and it shall be.”

He thought that he’d already made his wish, but again went along. “Fine,” he hissed, fighting hard to keep his temper, “I wish to regain all of my lost memories!” His last words were said with a dramatic flourish and more than a slightly mocking tone.

The crone let out a croaking laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

Before she even got the words out of her mouth he knew what was so funny. Just as he knew that he was not the devil, nor was he a demon. He knew his name and his home and his family and his life. He knew that this woman in front of him was not the devil, nor was she an angel... she was no angel... he knew more than he could stand. He was no demon... but he was no man... he *had* been a man once, but if he could have wished to become human it would have been a valid desire. He was filled with bit after terrible bit of knowledge. He could taste the juices of a million forbidden fruits... bittersweet... terrible...terrible.

She was still smiling... but sadly now, out of pity, yet still she was amused. “I’m laughing,” she said, “because that was also your first wish...”

Those were the last words he heard before he slipped into madness.

Before

Tick-tock, Tick-tock

The old grandfather clock plodded cheerfully in the calm of the old cabin. For Erik Jovis, though, it was excruciating. He shifted in his seat trying to ignore the constant ticking, but to no avail.

If it isn't one reason to put off work it's another, he sighed pleasantly. Then again, why would anyone want to work on such a beautiful day? He decided that this would be as good a time as any to stop and relax while there was still a bit of sun left to enjoy. A calm aroma of sweet bread and stew drifted in from the kitchen. "Alright, alright," he laughed to no one, "I said I'm convinced."

He trotted jovially down the corridor and into the kitchen to greet his wife. She smiled at him warmly as he rounded the corner. He wordlessly kissed her forehead and swept her into his arms and into the air. She laughed a little, but then put on airs of annoyance, though even a fool could see that she was flattered.

"Get out of this kitchen before I throw you out," she said, mustering as much gumption as she could pretend to possess.

Erik threw up his hands, "Whoa! I don't want any trouble lady. Just put down the milk and nobody gets hurt."

She blushed a bit, realizing that she was holding a jug of milk in an offensive posture. With a smile that completely negated her earlier guff, she put the milk down and hugged Erik warmly. "As much as I would love to stop what I'm doing," she said playfully, "some of us can't get away with being as lazy as *others* seem to."

He winked at her. He could take a hint. He decided to check on the boys and he said as much. "I'll go see what

the boys are doing... hopefully they won't attack me with a pint of cream." With that he smacked her sportingly on the bottom, stole a small pastry from the counter and jaunted out the door before she could protest.

Outside he was greeted by the distant sound of barking dogs. He became a little concerned because he couldn't see his dogs or the boys anywhere. His heart leapt into his throat when the boys appeared, running as fast as they could, over the nearest hill. He almost shouted to his wife and took off after them until he realized they were laughing. Taking no chance he took off toward them just to make certain. Sure enough though, a moment later the dogs followed closely behind, tongues and tails wagging happily.

Erik stopped, sighed heavily and put his hand over his heart. "Things like that will give a man a heart attack," he said to himself. After giving himself a moment to collect his bearings he went to meet his boys.

Parenting is tough. There was a time when the only person I was concerned about was me... and sometimes I couldn't even take that responsibility seriously. Now I have to deal with the irony that I might die of a heart attack worrying too much about other people. He wondered if he would trade in all the late nights of worry and fear if it meant that he would have to give up his family. *No*, he decided as his boys tackled him to the ground laughing, *death would be better*. The dogs caught up with the boys, and seeing easier prey on the ground, abandoned their earlier targets in favor of Erik. They attacked him together with a ferocity that wouldn't be overcome.

"Great," he moaned, "dog slobber."

His boys just laughed.

Dinner had been wonderful, as usual. He told his wife that and made sure the boys told her so, too, just before he sent them to get ready for bed. It took more than a little convincing to get the boys to bathe these days. He and his wife had an agreement. She would wash the dishes if

he would wash the boys. At first it had seemed like a fine deal. A young newlywed who had lived his life camping in dank locations and fighting in the name of his country... what better than to have a little wife to clean house and cook meals. Besides, babies were small and the least he could do for all of his comforts was clean a couple of adorable children.

What an idiot I was back then, he huffed as one of the boys shot past him wearing only a mocking smile. *Nobody bothered to tell me that the dirtier they get the harder it gets to make them bathe... She knew though, and she can't tell me she didn't. She knew they were boys and they would grow up to be obnoxious—but that dishes always do what they're told. Ah, well. That's the wisdom of age I guess.*

After a little fighting, a few threats and even more cursing, the latter of which provoked a shout of rebuke from his wife, he was able to corral the boys into a tub of water that was already cold. When they complained about the temperature he told them that it would cool them down and that it served them right.

“The hot water was here at the pre-appointed time,” he told them, “but when you decided not to show up for that appointment, the water then felt free to leave... and I say, ‘good for it!’” His boys crinkled their nose at this, splashed their father with the cooled water and found themselves promptly dunked under. Erik smiled at his sons and walked out to let them wash up on their own. It was tough getting them in there, but once he did they had no trouble cleaning themselves up.

He made his way back toward the kitchen to apologize to his wife—as he did each evening, for cursing their children. When he got to the kitchen he was more than a little annoyed. Not only had his wife left the room, but she hadn't finished the dishes. After the battle he went through he wasn't about to let her get away with leaving the dishes unfinished. He started toward the bedroom that he shared with his wife when he noticed something on the floor.

It was a broken dish.

In only a moment his resolve was as shattered as the dish on the floor. He wanted to remind himself of that moment earlier in the day when he had needlessly worried about his boys. He told himself that everything was fine and he was over exaggerating. *The dogs didn't even bark*, he reasoned. Those thoughts did nothing to console him or to slow him down. He didn't want to alarm the boys so he didn't go so far as to yell his wife's name. Still, he got to their bedroom as quickly as he could. He burst into the door terrified, but before he had time to learn anything he felt a sharp pain as he was struck from behind. He collapsed to the floor with a thud, his eyes staring at those of his terrified wife. Then everything went dark.

Tick-Tock, Tick-Tock

Ugh, is that the clock or a drum? My head is killing me. What happened? Erik Jovis reached for his throbbing temples—that is he *tried* to reach for them. The trouble with that was the rope keeping his arms from moving. Then he remembered. Where was his wife? Where were the boys? He tried to get a look around, but his vision was blurry and the pain from moving his head almost made him vomit. When he managed to regain a little composure he called out for his wife. There was no answer. He called for his children... still no answer. He decided that if his captors wanted to hurt him, there was little he could do about it in this state.

“I don't know who you are, but leave my family out of this.” He had spent plenty of his early days fighting rogues and kidnappers. He had no delusions that this plea would have any effect on his assailants. Still, as a father and a husband it was what he had to say. As if on cue a man entered holding his youngest boy by the hair. It was obvious that his son was in pain and scared, but it was equally obvious that he was trying to act as if he weren't. Erik was proud of his son's composure, but he had been proud of him before... he didn't need this moment to see the virtues of his children. Before Erik could even ask

what these men wanted from him, the man holding his child took out a knife and slit the boy's throat. No words of warning, or demands, he just did it. The shocked son looked at his father, eyes pleading for help that couldn't come, even if his father hadn't been tied to a chair. No one could save his son now.

He watched his boy collapse to the floor, drowning in his own blood. Erik Jovis couldn't even muster the strength to cry out... all he managed was a choking sound, as the dinner he had finished earlier in the evening spilled out of his lips. The puke and bile covered his chin and chest before spilling onto the floor. Chunks of meat and vegetable coated him. The man who had been holding his son looked more disgusted at the sight of vomit than he had been the act of murder. If Erik hadn't been so afraid for the family he still possessed he might have felt rage. For now though he was clouded with grief and fear—rage would come later.

The man said nothing. He still made no effort at demands or threats; he just left the room without a word. He didn't return for quite a while, forcing Erik to stare at the body of his son. The pool of blood that was leaking from the boy's wound had made its way to Erik's feet, mixing with the mess that he had thrown up minutes before. He couldn't bear to look at the body of his child, but he couldn't manage to look away. His eyes began to well up with tears. Sobs racked his body. He wanted nothing but to hold his child in his arms, but the ropes were too strong... and he was too weak. He was sure that even if he could rise from the chair his knees would buckle, leaving him just as pathetic and defenseless.

"Get this one out of here," yelled a voice from outside the door, "why did you let it bleed all over the place?"

It? They're referring to my son as an IT?! The rage was beginning to find its place among the other jumbled emotions rolling through the mind of Erik Jovis. The rage was quickly replaced with fear again as his oldest son... now his *only* son, was brought into the room. He was terrified, but unlike his brother, did nothing to hide it. With the sight of his younger brother being drug out by

his feet, face scraping the ground, a trail of blood following him—how could anyone not be afraid? Erik was certainly afraid. The boy surely knew that. The vomit covering his father must have been a dead giveaway.

The bearded attacker that entered this time seemed to be the man in charge. He walked up to Erik and stared with cool blue eyes. He thought for a moment, then spoke, “I’m gonna give you a choice sheriff.”

Erik had been a man of the law, but never a sheriff. Nevertheless this man seemed to know something about him. He needed to find out how much before he heard or said anything more.

“What have I done to you?”

“No pretense? I figured you’d do more pleadin’ or beggin’ than that.”

“Would it help if I did?”

“Probably not.”

Erik said nothing. He didn’t want to push the man too far by insisting that he answer his question. The answer didn’t really matter now anyway. He didn’t care what he might have done to this man. His son was dead; now it was about what he was *going* to do to him.

Seeing that Erik wasn’t going to say anything else the man continued, “Now, as I was sayin’, I’m gonna give you a choice. We’re gonna kill two more members of your family, no question about that. What I will do is let you decide which of you is gonna die.”

His son looked at him, terrified.

“I can’t make that choice,” Erik whispered.

The bearded man seemed to have anticipated this. “You see,” he replied with a syrupy tone, “you don’t have much of a say in this. If you don’t pick, then we’ll just kill your wife and son and leave you alive to regret it... but as a penalty for making no choice we’ll have to,” he searched for the word, “enjoy your wife before we kill her.”

At this his son spoke up, “Let ‘em kill me! I’m...I’m not afraid.” Anyone could have figured out just how afraid the boy was, but even the attackers didn’t

contradict the boy. They almost seemed to admire him—little good it would do him.

“I can’t son.” That was all he could say. He wanted to tell his son that his death would do nothing for his mother. She would be dead even if she could breathe... especially if these monsters told her that her son or husband could have lived in her place. The same went for Erik. If his family died in his place he wouldn’t be able to live with himself... but he was being forced to decide just that. Either himself, or one of his family members could live.

His son wasn’t angry. He just nodded. He knew exactly what his father was thinking. As scared as he was he had offered to be noble, but he knew that his father could never have accepted that offer. He also knew that he would probably die. When he realized this he became less afraid. “Live.”

Erik was a bit shocked by his son’s sudden resolve.

“What?”

Apparently the two men in the room were thinking the same thing. They shifted uncomfortably.

“They want you to hate yourself for making the choice, but if you refuse, it’ll be worse. They’ll hurt mom more if you don’t pick and then kill us both anyway. Just tell them to kill us. If it makes you feel better tell them *not* to kill you.” Seeing his father’s skepticism the boy continued, echoing Erik’s own thoughts from moments before, “Mom would never survive if we died anyway.”

Erik wanted to tell them to kill them all, that none of his family could make such a choice, but he knew these men had already decided on the most painful torture they could devise. He looked at the bearded man, “I’ll do what you say, but you should know that leaving me alive will be a mistake. I ask that you kill us all if you kill anyone. If my family is dead then I don’t want to live,” at this his eyes narrowed, “and you don’t want me to live either.”

“Well,” the leader told his henchman matter-of-factly, “you heard his choice. What are you waiting for?”

The second man, the man holding his son, pushed the boy toward his father and slit his throat—just as he had the first, only this time he let the boy fall onto his helpless

father. The son didn't seem shocked or afraid anymore. He just looked calm. Before the light of life flickered out he looked at his father with total confidence that his death would lead to justice somehow. His father felt little consolation in that vote of confidence from his dying son. All he felt was blood...the warm life of his son draining out onto him. If there had been anything left in his churning stomach he would have vomited again. It didn't help any knowing that his wife was next. He only hoped that this man kept his word and made it quick.

He had no such luck. His wife was ushered into the room, much as the boys had been. When she saw her husband tied up and her dead son draped over him she crumpled to the floor. It only got worse.

The bearded assailant spoke again, "Do you see this man," he gestured at Erik. "He just chose his own life over the life of you and your son. We gave him a choice and he chose himself."

She looked at Erik in disbelief.

"Don't believe me? Go ahead, ask him."

"Is it true?" her eyes pleaded with him to say otherwise.

Erik choked back tears, "It's not that simple."

"See there? What did I tell you? He chose your death so that he could live," then came the hammer, "even when your son begged him to change his mind." He let the sentence hang there in the air. He reveled in the shocked and disgusted look on the woman's face and before Erik could deny that false claim, they took her away.

The leader of the men that had ruined his life leaned in, and whispered, "Let me tell you a little secret. We were never going to kill you. I think this is much worse than death anyway... don't you?" With that he walked away, out of the room, leaving Erik and the body of his son just as they were.

Over the next few hours he heard the sounds of the men as they defiled his wife—his wife that had been forced to outlive her children, who also believed that her husband would choose his life over that of their son. He wished that it weren't true. It hadn't happened the way

these men let his wife believe, but it was still true. Now, after all she had been through she was being raped by these men, knowing full well that she would die at the end of it... maybe even wishing for death by the end.

Then suddenly the noise stopped. One of the men came into the room. *Maybe they'll kill me after all*, he thought in a daze. *No, that's wishful thinking. I don't deserve something so kind anyway.*

It turned out that he was right, he wouldn't die today. Instead the goon just hauled the body of Erik's son off of him and kicked his chair to the floor. His head struck the ground hard. His blood mixed with the blood of his children and he blacked out for the second time that night.

The man tried to open his eyes. The right eye cooperated, but the left was sealed shut by something. He tried to reach up and clear the gunk from his eyelid, but his arms wouldn't move. He would have panicked, but he was too exhausted and in far too much pain. He wasn't sure how he had ended up this way, but it couldn't have been anything pleasant. It might be better that he couldn't remember anything. Even his name wouldn't come to him.

With his good eye he tried to get a look around. It was dark in the room. A tiny sliver of moonlight crept through an unseen, nearby window. *At least I'm not blind*, he thought. *That doesn't help me much though. All that means is that I can see how bad the situation is... maybe I can get through these ropes.* He wiggled his wrists, but to no avail. He was stuck. He might be able to work his way out in hours or days, but he might not last that long in his current condition. *Whatever that is*, he thought bitterly.

He wasn't even sure that the people who had left him this way were done with him. They could be back any moment—they might even be in another room, just waiting for him to try something. He shook those thoughts off. *If they were going to kill me, they'd have*

done it... and there's nothing I could do anyway if they decided to kill me now.

He didn't realize that he had nothing to fear from his attackers. They were hours gone and had no thoughts of going back for him. He worked on the ropes for countless minutes, perhaps hours. By the time he escaped the room was being kissed by beams of light from the morning sun. He would have preferred the dark. The room was a mess.

He realized that he couldn't smell anything. If he could have, the vomit and blood would have surely worn on him by now. There were puddles of it, bile, blood and half digested bits of food. *Too much blood*, he realized. He was exhausted and his head was killing him, but he hadn't lost much blood. It must have belonged to someone else. The truth became apparent to him and he was even more thankful that he couldn't recall recent events.

They must have killed someone I cared for while I watched, he thought coolly, probably trying to hurt me. Joke's on them, I don't even know my name... although if I could remember who I was, I might not be able to stand up strait, let alone crack jokes. Maybe I've forgotten on purpose, he theorized. *Nah, these bumps on my head argue strongly with that theory.*

He found a tub full of water and cleaned himself up as much as possible. He also found fresh clothing to put on, as well as some food in the kitchen. Overall the cabin he woke up to seemed to be in decent shape. Other than the aforementioned mess in the bedroom and a single broken dish, the place was immaculate. *They knew exactly what they were doing. No signs of chaos, they didn't wreck the place... they just killed a few people then left me here to die... or just as likely to live. I wonder which would have been worse.*

He considered going to the law, or neighbors, but he might have been a criminal for all he knew. For the first time he considered that he might have been the assailant and the killer. The family that he attacked could have managed to overpower him. They might be bringing back law enforcements at this very moment. He was pretty sure that wouldn't be the case, but he couldn't really

afford to take that chance. He made his way to the door. He flung it open to the view of a short, hunched old woman. Her yellow eyes peered up at him as if asking what had taken him so long. Without waiting for an invitation she wordlessly shuffled inside.

“Did I know you?”

She thought about that for a moment, noting his use of the past tense. “You didn’t, and you don’t, but you will and you won’t,” she seemed pleased by her rhyme.

“Well, that makes a lot of sense. Now if you’ll excuse me,” he started past her, eager to get a head start on anyone who might be after him. When he turned around she was blocking his path. Had she been there before? He was sure that he had passed her. His eyes narrowed at the little woman, but he stopped.

She nodded in satisfaction at this. “Good, good, we can’t have you running off and leaving your wishes you know.”

“Wishes?”

“Oh, yes. You get three of them, one for the woman and one for each boy. That’s the way it goes,” she paused for a moment considering something, “besides; these things always work better in threes.”

A woman and two boys? Was he being compensated for a loss, or rewarded for murder?

As if she was reading his mind she chimed in, “Surely your family would want you to be happy, so make your wishes.”

“My family?”

“One for the woman, one for each boy,” she repeated, nodding her head.

“Did I kill them?”

“It is not my place to say. I am only here to grant your requests. One for the woman and—“

“—one for each boy,” he finished, cutting her off, “yes, I got that.” It was becoming more and more obvious what his first wish had to be—that is, if he believed in wishes. Did he? After a moment he decided that, for now, he would. After all, until the previous owner of this mind woke up, it was his show. The

problem was that the wish was a dangerous one. In effect, he was a Pandora's Box. If he made the wish that he knew he had to make... he might just regret the hell out of it. He could only imagine the kind of pain that goes along with losing a family. Still, it was obvious that this woman would never give him the answers he wanted without some sort of payment—namely one of his wishes. Finally he spoke, “Ok, I’ll bite. I’ll make a wish... and I’m pretty sure you know what it’s gonna be.”

“You want knowledge,” she stated simply.

“Yes,” he agreed. He waited for a moment. When he sensed that she was waiting on him he sighed and then stated calmly, “I wish,” he took a deep breath, bracing for the next moment, “that I could remember everything that has happened to me.”

“So you shall.”

He heard the words, but he couldn't really understand them. He was too busy understanding a million other things. Knowledge hit him like a whirlwind. He remembered that he was Erik Jovis and that his family was gone, slaughtered before his eyes. His wife, his children dead; his life shattered. He remembered the promise he made to his son, the vengeance that he must exact on those men—the men. He remembered them too, but more than that, he *knew* them. He hadn't been very specific when he made his wish. He hadn't wished for his memory to return, he had wished to remember *everything* that had happened to him. He saw the men now. He knew their names, their families, their homes, their jobs.

The knowledge was maddening. It was like fire. It was like knowing every bad thing that was going to happen in the universe, but only being able to stop a few. He was seeing and feeling every moment since his birth... things that a normal man couldn't remember. His father and mother when he said his first words, his first broken bone, lost tooth, lost love... Everything that had ever angered him

He was in pain, he was angry, he was disgusted and sick. Torment was now as much a part of him as the name he had recently forgotten. He wanted to let someone else

feel this knowledge, this pain... and he would... the men that took his life would feel these things too... at least until he was ready to kill them.

What Erik Jovis did next was inhuman. Some of what he did was too disgusting to describe. Evils that made everything that had happened to him seem kind. He found the men that murdered his family. He tied each man to his own chair. He killed the families of each man before his eyes. He raped their wives then gutted them. He went further still. He kept the men alive by feeding them the flesh of their own children. He didn't stop with their immediate families either. He moved on to parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins... and he let his assailants witness each act. He let them bathe in every ounce of blood.

Not all of them went easily. Some fought hard. He was cut and scarred beyond recognition; if he noticed the extra pain, he didn't show it.

He wanted each villain to suffer forever... but in the end they couldn't. Eventually they would give up. Their will to live would fail, or their will to die succeed.

He'd saved the bearded blue-eyed leader for last, but he had been the quickest to die. It was pitiful really. Of all of the men *he* had been the one to say that he was sorry... Erik knew that he was more sorry at having been caught than he was for the things he had done—or maybe not. Now that he had experienced that pain for himself, maybe he understood why he had to die for his sins...

That's when it hit Erik full force. He had become as evil as the men that took his family. No—he had become *more* evil. He hadn't taken just one family, but many. Children and wives that had no idea what their awful husbands had done. Without the rage that had kept him blind for so long he began to see all too clearly the man he had become—if he even was a man any longer. He thought about the choice he'd made that day at his family's cabin. The old woman had given him the opportunity to wish for anything; he could have chosen a new identity, or he could have wished for a mansion a

thousand miles away. Instead he made the choice that he knew would lead to the worst possible ending.

Well now he could change that. He would find her and get his wishes. He would remove this evil from his mind, if not from his soul. And then, as if she could hear his thoughts, there she was. He wasn't sure how long she had been standing there, but there she was.

"I'm tired of this. I want to forget all this."

"Follow me," she said quietly.

She led him down a path and into the forest. She led him to the center of a circle of trees, obviously carved out by men. The light from the sun barely peeked through the shroud of trees overhead.

"Why did you bring me here?"

"Here you will not recognize what has happened. When you woke up in your home you surmised what must have happened and you decided that you had to remember it for yourself. If you wake up here in this clearing there will be no evidence of what you have done, or who you have been. Now, take off those clothes."

He did so; she took one look at him and the scars that covered his body. "Those scars could be a problem, but we can't worry about that," she looked at him and nodded, "you know what you have to do."

He nodded back, "I wish that I could forget everything that has happened since the moment I met you," he paused and arched an eyebrow, "no offense."

She simply smiled, gathered up his clothing and walked into the woods. Erik wondered how long it would take for his wish to come true...

After

The man stood alone in the center of a dark copse of aged oaks. In the course of the few and indiscriminate openings in the jade vegetation above, he could tell that his near dark surroundings were, in fact, a small pocket of night in the midst of a brighter day.

A brighter day that was far-flung from this place....