

Anders – Short Story

The light here isn't right. It's too yellow. Too harsh. And it all comes from above. For a moment, I'm not sure why that seems wrong. The sun... that's always been there, right? What am I remembering?

The word comes back to me. *The Fade*. I am a mage. I've spent time in the place I remember. It is a land of mist, of dreams. And I'm right; the light there is different, emanating from the ground, the walls, not a single pinpoint source. But I've never been more than a visitor there. Why does it suddenly feel like home?

What else can't I remember?

I sit up, and the light brightens, darkens, steadies. The throb in my head returns and without thinking, I draw on a breath of mana to drive it away. The pain lifts as the magic settles over it, soothing and cooling. I try to think. Let's start with something simple. My name. What is my name?

I am Anders.

I am Justice.

This never used to be so hard.

Suddenly it comes back to me. Justice's voice, *my* voice, speaking through the rotting face of the body he once claimed. "It is time. You have shown me an injustice greater than any I have faced. Do you have the courage to accept my aid?"

I knew what he offered.

To stay in the mortal realm, he needs a host, a body to inhabit for a lifetime, not a corpse which will rot out from beneath him. If I gave him that, he would give me all he had, all he was. Together, we could remake Thedas into a world where justice rules, not fear.

A world with no Circle. No templars. A world where every mage can learn to use their gifts and still return home at night. Where no mother ever need hide her child... or lose him to the fear of his neighbors. Where magic is recognized as a gift of the Maker, not the curse it has become.

It's almost too much to imagine. The Circle, the templars, they've shaped my life. I was no more than twelve when they came for me. My mother wept when they fixed the chains to my wrists, but my father was glad to see me gone. He had been afraid, ever since the fire in the barn. Not just afraid of what I could do, but afraid of *me*, afraid my magic was punishment for whatever petty sins he imagined the Maker sat in judgment upon.

I always knew I wouldn't submit. I could never be what they wanted from me -- compliant, obedient, *guilty*. But before Justice, I was alone. I never thought beyond my own escape: Where would I hide? How long before they found me?

Now, even that thought repulses me. Why should so many others live with what I will not? Why must the Circle of Magi stand? Just because it always has, just because those who read Andraste's words twisted them to mean that mages must be prisoners? Why has there never been a revolution?

"He's coming to." A voice, getting closer. Someone I know. A Grey Warden.

"What in the Maker's name happened to him?" There are two of them. This one I don't know.

"He just went crazy. His eyes were glowing... His bloody skin cracked open and it was like he was on fire inside. Just kept raving... something about injustice, a revolution. Thought I was going to have to put the blighter down like a mad dog, then he just collapsed."

"Damned mages."

I struggle to stand, to open my eyes and face them like a man, not the chewed-up pile of hurlock spew I feel like. I can see them now. It's Rolan; of course it is. The price I had to pay for the Grey Wardens' generosity in recruiting me out from under the templars' noses. He was one of them, before his Chantry was destroyed by the darkspawn and he felt the calling to join the Wardens. No one ever said a deal had been struck, but as soon as the templars stopped their protests, Rolan turned up in the Wardens, and we've fielded every assignment together since. It's all too clear the templars sent him to keep watch.

And whatever possessed me to make my deal with Justice anywhere he might witness?

As he appears, I regret that choice of words, because something stirs inside me, and I wonder if it's harder for Justice to exert his will in a body that a living consciousness still inhabits. But it's a futile question, because his thoughts are mine and he is me, and I'm no longer sure what I was even asking.

Rolan is in front of me now, and the white griffin on his chest plate blurs in my sight with the steel-grey sword-of-flames on his companion's armor, and I know with white-hot certainty that Rolan has betrayed me.

"The Wardens agreed we can't harbor an abomination," he is saying, nasal voice vibrating with smug satisfaction, and I don't need to hear more. He's brought the templars down on me, on *us*, and this is just what we've been waiting for.

I don't see myself when I change, only the reflection in their eyes and the sound of their screams. My arm lashes out and silverite doesn't so much break as explode in a shower of molten metal. The sword melts, running down the templar's chest, and I follow up with a wave of flames which scorch the flesh from his face, leaving only bone so hot it smolders. The trees are burning... the tent... everything around us.

Rolan is still standing, and I smell the lyrium he drank, which guarded him from the blast. But he's afraid. I see his shield jerk and know he barely resisted the urge to flee, and I have a sudden thought, "*What am I?*" for I've seen him face both broodmothers and abominations without fear.

And then his sword is level with my chest, and I let it come, because it is only steel and cannot hurt me, for I am not of mortal men. And when it sinks hilt-deep in my flesh with no reaction, that's when he gives up. He turns and runs, and from behind, I tear his head off at the neck, no magic, just *me*, whatever that is now. His blood splashes into my open mouth and it tastes like honeyed wine and the warmth spreads through me.

He hated me, and he is dead. He feared me, and he is dead. He hunted me, and he is dead.

They will all die. Every templar, every holy sister who stands in the way of our freedom will die in agony and their deaths will be our fuel. We will have justice. We will have *vengeance*.

And suddenly I'm alone, standing in a burning forest, with the bodies of templars and wardens at my feet. So many, and I didn't even know they were there. Didn't even know I had killed them, but the evidence is all around me. Not the aftermath of a battle as I've known it, but a bloody abattoir of rent limbs and torn and eaten flesh.

This is not justice. This is not the spirit who was my friend, my *self*. What has he become? What have I become? We must get out of here. There is no place for me in the Grey Wardens now.

Is there a place for me anywhere?