

“LIE OF OMISSION”

“*Private Farmboy!* What are you? Tired? Get up that gods-damned rope and ring my bell, before I skin you alive and feed you to the Company Gunny!”

Mage Recruit Anders, still gasping from the three-mile formation run, dropped his hands to the tops of his knees. A quick jolt from the Mage Instructor’s baton-wand straightened him up, and he sucked hard for wind. He looked up, forlorn, at the bell looming at the top of the tower. Inhaling the cold morning air was like breathing daggers of ice. His face, flush from the exertion and exhaustion of the morning’s training schedule, was mottled in purples and reds.

This was only week four of recruit training, and he was hating life more than usual.

“Yes, sir!” he managed to say between ragged breaths.

Anders, still puffing hard, reached for the rope with his hands. Another jolt, harder this time, made him pull his hand back as if something bit him.

“Gods-damn it, Private Farmboy, did you join the Fingers Corps, or the Mage Corps?”

“This recruit joined the Mage Corps, sir!”

“Well, then, get your snake-strokers off my rope, there, and utilize the training my beloved Corps has invested in you. Now, the Primary Ascent chant. Belt it out, like you’ve got a pair! Focus!”

Anders’ mind raced, trying to put aside the pain in his side and the biting cold. They had just learned this one yesterday. *Ascend, ascend, ascend...which prayer to which god granted flight? Zrandos? Ravahl? No, not Ravahl, she was fire primary, flight secondary. Zrandos. He was the primary.*

“While we’re young, Private Farmboy! Select the runestone, focus the will, and invoke the chant until the deed’s done. The rope is just a focus object, to keep you from breaking your silly neck on an unguided flight. Now, ascend my obstacle and ring that bell!”

“Yes, sir!”

Fumbling through the rune stones carried by each recruit on a string of sacred silver, Anders ticked them off one by one until a light blue triangle was in his hand. Though his lungs were burning, he held his breath, closed his eyes, and called upon the favor of the Sky God, Zrandos.

His feet left the ground, and he rose on unsteady currents of mystic energy. The sensation unsettled him, breaking his half-formed focus. Like a fish, Recruit Anders flopped on his side, falling from four feet up. After impact, the hulking sergeant clamped an iron gauntlet around Anders’ forearm and jerked the young man to his feet.

“Louder, and with faith, gods-damn it, Private Farmboy! Visualize the destination. Visualize the bell. Feel the power flow through you. Set yourself aside from your fear, and use it as power, instead. Now, unscrew yourself, and do it again. Visualize, channelize, attack! Quit dreaming of milking the cows back home and get up my rope!”

“Visualize, channelize, attack, yes, sir!”

Anders brushed the cold sand from his side and pinched the glowing runestone between his thumb and forefinger. Bracing himself, he barked out the prayer in a growling, repetitious manner. He felt the power course through him, forming an ethereal halo around his body. His shaking boots lifted from the ground, slow and smooth, and he rose. The bell’s ornate rune carvings became more pronounced as he flew higher. He marveled at the light blue energy pulsing around him as he ascended. He gauged his altitude by stealing a quick view down. The Mage Instructor’s stern red eyes met his own, and he faltered.

“Today, Anders! Today! We’ll all be Necromancer thralls by the time you’re up the rope! Don’t look at me, look at the bell! The bell! Gods-damn it, recruit—”

Anders, rattled by the MI’s snarling commands, wavered just out of arm’s reach of the bell. He grabbed for the ringer, but it slipped through his fingers. Fear flooded through him, and the wispy corona disappeared. Powerless, he fell.

The Mage Instructor interrupted his curse, focusing instead on catching the plummeting recruit before he hit the training field from three stories up.

Anders curled into a ball, trying to soften a crash that never came. Inches from impact, Anders opened his eyes. A yellow suspension field held him in an unyielding grip. Growling out a sub-incantation, the Mage Instructor opened the fingers wide on his non-wand hand. Anders was now spread-eagled, helpless in the glowing grip of the spell. With a flick of the MI's baton-wand, Anders spun like a pinwheel on a windy day.

“Close, Private Farmboy, but close ain't enough. You come see me back at the squad bay. You an' me are gonna party, you understand that?”

“Yes, sir!” the exhausted recruit said, nauseous from the fall and gyrations. The tall, lanky recruit choked back vomit when he hit the ground. Wiping his mouth with the sleeve of his combat robe, Anders shuffled off to the next training station on the circuit.

Mage Instructor Sergeant Eskola pointed to the next nervous recruit in line to fly up the obstacle.

“Next, you, Private *Slowpoke*, you see my bell at the top of my obstacle? Yes? Let's see if you can fly better than you run. Up the rope!”

“Yes, sir!”

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Mage Instructor Sergeant Eskola's voice bellowed from his office, menace ingrained in every syllable.

“Private Farmboy! Report to my quarterdeck!”

The recruits of Platoon 421, A (Amulet) Company, Seventh Recruit Training Battalion, froze. The murmurs of spell memorization or low, homesick conversations between rack-mates ceased, and the long, open room became as quiet as the grave. Recruit Anders shot upright from his foot locker. The battle scrolls he was studying fell from his lap in a chaotic shuffle of parchment and glowing ink.

“Recruit Anders, on the way, sir!” he said, answering the summons of the Mage Instructor. Anders shuddered. He had only been here a month at recruit training, but Sergeant Eskola’s intense dislike for him was more than quite clear.

Anders trampled to a stop on the polished tiles next to the Mage Instructor’s office door. Locking himself at the position of attention, he shouted out, “Recruit Anders, reporting as ordered, sir!”

A small boulder the size and shape of a beer keg floated through the Mage Instructor office’s door and on to the small clearing, or quarterdeck, at the front of the squad bay. Surrounded by a nimbus of glowing energy, the heavy rock spun end over end, much like Anders earlier in the day. Mage

Instructor Sergeant Eskola's baton-wand twirled at the same idle rate as the turning stone. Anders saw the hard gleam in Eskola's red-tinged eyes, and gulped.

"Time to enhance your focus, recruit. You see my rock, here?"

"Yes, sir!"

"This is my strength training rock. Using a rock is appropriate, in your case. You drop my rock on my spotless quarterdeck, and life gets a lot worse, you understand, Private?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Prepare your mind. You will assume the combat ready stance on my command. Ready..."

Private Anders shifted from the position of attention into a crouch. He drew one boot to the rear, at the preparatory command, curling his hands into half-fists by his sides.

"...Execute."

"Rah!" the lanky recruit roared with all his nervous might, stomping his forward boot on the tile. Both open fists shot forward, ready for grappling or spellwork.

"Weak, Anders. Weak sauce, just like today on the rope. Get back."

“Get back, yes, sir!” Ander said, falling back in to the position of attention.

“Private Anders, you will assume the combat ready stance. Ready...*Execute!*” Eskola barked out, his voice filling the squad bay. The members of the platoon tried to appear busy while keeping an eye on the quarterdeck proceedings, afraid to be caught looking, but glad it wasn't them. Eskola was the “hard helm,” the disciplinarian member of the Mage Instructors assigned to their platoon. His role was the enforcer, the tester, a balance to the Senior Mage Instructor's kinder, more paternal methods of mystic instruction.

Anders went through the motion again, trying to stomp his boot through the tile, trying to shove the air out of the way of his outthrust hands.

“*Rah!*”

“That’s better. Now, induce a field of levitation. Assume control over my rock.”

“Sir?”

“Sir, what? Do as you’re instructed! Focus...take positive control of the object...and *lift*. Don’t let my rock hit the quarterdeck, recruit. Focus!”

Anders reached out with his fledgling powers, trying to grapple with the rock, trying to hold its slippery, ponderous mass above the polished, waxed floor. A soul-thumping impact went through Anders’ body as Eskola pulled his own influence away the stone. The weight was now his, alone, to bear.

“*Gah*...Sir, I...I don't think...”

“I? Did the filthy word ‘I’ come out of your suck, Private? Are you some kind of singleton? Some kind of individual? You're not here to be an individual, Private, you're here to become part of my Mage Corps, part of a fighting unit. There's no room in a fighting unit for singletons, do you understand me?”

“This, this recruit doesn't think he can—”

“Oh, but you can, Anders, you can. I've seen the magus reports. I've seen your potentiality scores. You're strong enough to become a battlemancer, if you put your mind to it. You just have to get past your weakness. And what draws out the poison of weakness out of the body, Recruit Anders?”

“P—pain, sir!”

“That's right, nature's lesson enhancer, pain. Pain's going to help pull that weakness right out of you, recruit, and leave you stronger. Well, boy, we're going to make you strong today,” the Mage Instructor said, a mix of amusement and iron sadism on his face.

Anders gritted his teeth, willing the rock to please, gods, please don't fall to the quarterdeck. The Mage Instructor ordered him to spin the rock clockwise. Anders spun it clockwise. The Mage Instructor ordered him to lift the rock above Anders' head. Sweat poured from the recruit, soaking his utility robes from the strain. Anders tried to blink away the stinging perspiration

from his eyes. He dared not look away from the polished granite cylinder hovering inches over his face.

“My rock only weighs about 800 pounds, Recruit Farmboy. Not even half a ton. What are you afraid of? Gettin' squished? You've got girls back on the farm bigger than that, don't ya? Keep holding that stone up, recruit. Don't take your eyes off it. Shift your fear and pain. Channelize it into power.”

Anders emitted a low growl. The prolonged ache of holding the solid mass up, maneuvering it, began to fatigue him. The muscles in his forearms began to twang like strings, and his fingers cramped. The low growl became a howl of white-hot agony.

“Push it, Recruit! Don't show me tears and whining, show me some intestinal fortitude. You won't have a chance to squeal like a piggy when you're facing the enemy! Now, spin my rock! Counterclockwise, this time! Spin it until I get tired.”

“Counter...clockwise, yes...sir!”

A shadow loomed through the rune-carved window at the front of the squad bay. The armored vault doors slammed open before any of the recruits could sound the call to attention. As the boom of the doors echoed through the sparse living quarters, the Senior Mage Instructor appeared in the archway. His broad frame, covered in the Mage Instructor's uniform of polished parade armor and spotless robes, filled the entrance.

Anders could hear the jostled pandemonium of forty recruits all vaulting to the position of attention behind him. The Senior Mage Instructor, Sword Sergeant Teller, pointed the tip of his baton-wand at his subordinate Mage Instructor, Sergeant Eskola. The brass dragon carved into the SMI's command staff had rubies for eyes. The jewels of the sculpted serpent shifted to Anders and his floating rock. The weary recruit felt a small shock run through him, and the weight of the stone seemed to diminish away to nothing, if only for a second.

“Mage Instructor, secure that activity, and have the platoon form up for instruction. Five minutes, outside.”

“Yes, Senior Mage Instructor,” the red-eyed sergeant said, taking the rock from Anders' control with the barest flick of his baton. Anders collapsed to the deck, coughing and dry-heaving from the effort. Still holding the rock in mid-air, Mage Instructor Sergeant Eskola rotated a bracelet on the same arm as his iron gauntlet. His chest expanded as he drew in breath, and his eyes transitioned from their normal crimson hue to unholy roaring flames.

“Recruit Platoon 421-A, Report To The Training Circle Outside! Three minutes! Squad leaders...Get 'Em Moving!”

The MI's magic-enhanced voice thundered through the squad bay, and forty privates turned from attentive statues to a frenzied blur of action. The mage recruits picked as small unit leaders over their fellow privates issued hoarse orders, trying to emulate the Mage Instructor in his use of The Voice Of

Command. None were masters of the spell, nor had an iron gauntlet to boost it. The closest attempt came from third squad's leader, Recruit Jenkins. She managed to spit sparks from her eyes, no flames, and the volume component wasn't there, yet, but her squad members knew she meant business. They were the first to stow their gear and run downstairs to the formation ring.

Despite securing the training weight and donning his armor, SGT Eskola still arrived downstairs before the majority of the recruits. Recruit Anders was the last out of the squad bay doors, ragged and weary. He limped into formation, taking his place in fourth squad's array.

The platoon formation was not a traditional box-like phalanx. Instead, Platoon 421-A formed in four arc-shaped ranks, by squad, on their quarter of the large formation circle. The other three platoons of Amulet company were still in their barracks, though things were stirring in the other three squad bays behind them. After prodding a nearby recruit, Collins, with his baton-wand for not snapping up his chest-plate armor, SGT Eskola barked the order for the platoon to fall in. The disorganized rabble became forty statues, once again.

“Ugly. Damned ugly. 'Curved and arrayed,' people, 'curved and arrayed.' You should be able to draw a straight line from the center of the company formation circle through the head of the recruit in front of you. Your heels should be on the ring-line, proper spacing left and right. Get there, now, you mob.”

After some quick shuffling and adjustments, the platoon resembled a more textbook formation, though it still wasn't to Sergeant Eskola's satisfaction. Before he could select an offending recruit, the Senior MI, Sword Sergeant Teller, descended from the squad bay stairs. A small, gleaming message bubble appeared in SSGT Teller's outstretched palm.

The translucent orb flew from his hand to that of SGT Eskola's. The sergeant's eyes glowed as the message bubble fed its information to his mind, then faded away to nothingness.

“Recruit Anders, Gideon J.”

“Present, sir,” Anders answered.

“Fall out of my formation, and report to the Senior Mage Instructor. Move.”

“Yes, sir!”

Turning his attention to the remainder of the platoon, SGT Eskola ordered them to face right and march. A string of profound and profane curses and observations of their marching prowess found Recruit Anders' ears as he hustled back to the Senior Mage Instructor.

“Recruit Anders, reporting as ordered, sir!”

“Anders. You're the one Mage Instructor Sergeant Eskola calls 'Farmboy,' yes?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Where are you from, again, son?”

“Mesquite, Nevada, sir.”

“Nevada? They got farms in Nevada?”

“Yes, sir. By the Virgin River. Folks raise melons and cattle. Alfalfa, too, sometimes. That's how I—that's how This Recruit learned to raise crops, sir. This Recruit was a Grower, a Plant-lifter, sir.”

“That's hard country to grow things in, I imagine. It takes real talent to bring anything up from that soil,” Sword Sergeant Teller said, producing a scroll from his sleeve. It was Recruit Anders' training and personnel scroll, a complete record of his short time in the service.

Anders beamed. It was unusual for the Senior Mage Instructor to use a relaxed tone with any of his charges, or to pay a compliment. The floating document unwound farther, unraveling almost to the very end.

“Your personnel scrolls don't mention next of kin information. You told the scribes 'none' during in-processing, and you pledged an oath to be entirely forthcoming when you signed up to join the Mage Corps. Do you remember that?”

Recruit Anders gulped, and nodded.

“Just now, though, the Recruit Training Battalion Commander informed me you're to be notified of a death in the family. Word came in from your parents. Back home. The parents that you said you didn't have. You want to explain that to me, son?” the Senior Mage Instructor said.

Recruit Anders' face turned pale.

“Oh, my gods, who died, sir? I...er, This Recruit--”

“You didn't bother to tell anyone that your brother was Brigham Anders? *The* Brigham Anders, the Medal of St. Mattis recipient? The hero of the Reykjavik Gap? Did that little nugget of information just slip your mind, or something?”

A long pause. Recruit Anders dropped his head to his chest.

“Does this mean I'm--”

“*I'm?* Never mind *you*, Private. There's more to this than just a blank space on a form that you just *happened* to leave out. Now, did you know Master Sergeant Brigham Anders, yes, or no?”

Tears of shame welled in Anders' eyes. He strained to keep them back, but they came anyway. He choked out a whisper.

“What's that? Speak up, son,” the SMI said, his eyes flashing.

“Brigham...Brigham is my oldest brother, sir. What do you mean, 'did,' sir?” Anders said, his voice distant and frail.

“Well, I'm sorry to let you know, then: Master Sergeant Brigham Anders was killed in a training accident last night. A sync crystal malfunctioned. He was too far gone for the healers to mend. They even tried to invoke a supreme resurrection rite. It wasn't enough. You have my condolences. He was a good man, a real war hero,” SSGT Teller said.

Anders began to sputter, his mouth unable to form the right words.

“He said that I...I shouldn't let...that I wouldn't get a fair...Brigham is really dead? Are you sure? You said it was a synch crystal malfunction. That means he could have been pulled--”

“He's gone, Private, and you've got other matters to deal with. Again, I'm sorry. Get upstairs, pack your gear. You're heading home,” the SMI said.

“But...can I come back? Can I finish my training?”

“Get upstairs and secure your personal belongings, Anders. You have five minutes. The Battalion Commander is waiting. Let's go.”

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The Senior Mage Instructor paced up and down the hallway outside the Battalion Commander's office. The pentagon-shaped rank rune of a Mage Corps Lieutenant Colonel door glowed, held in place by a pair of dragons with

ruby eyes, much like those on the baton-wand of the SMI. The animated rune was a mix of black and red, a slow vortex of magma across the face of the door.

The door opened of its own accord, and a voice boomed from the room inside.

“Sword Sergeant Teller? Are you here with your recruit, this Anders, J.J.?”

SSGT Teller, caught in the door frame during his pacing, bolted to attention.

“I am, sir. Private Anders is here for separation out-processing, sir.”

“Send him in, first, Sword Sergeant.”

“Yes, sir.”

The SMI's steel gaze locked on to the sitting recruit. Anders stood up, scared and shaking. He had never been to the battalion offices before. This was the place of whispered barracks rumors. A place where shame-tainted tickets to home awaited, a surefire pathway to leaving in disgrace, and he was about to enter its inner sanctum.

With Teller's iron gauntlet clamped firmly on his shoulder, Anders stepped into the office. The accommodations were spartan. A carved wooden desk, stained black, dominated the center of the room. On the wall to the left were a handful of plaques and photos, and one framed photo, a casual scene of two figures standing together on a battlefield. One of the faces in the photos

was easy to recognize: his brother, Brigham. The other was a younger version of the officer sitting in front of him.

A dictation scroll hung in mid-air next to the desk, ready to burn an official transcript of their conversation. A summoned chair scuttled up behind Anders, forcing him to sit.

“Take a seat, Private. No need to for six-and-centered reporting. Not anymore. You’re about to be a civilian, soon,” the man said. He was short, balding, with a wrinkled burn covering the left half of his face. The man’s ear on that side was a curled, pink nub of scar tissue.

“Where's this man's training record, Sword Sergeant?”

SSGT Teller handed over the rolled scroll that encompassed Private Anders’ Mage Corps career to the Lieutenant Colonel. He accepted it with a quick nod, and the Senior Mage Instructor pulled back behind Anders.

The business-like senior officer unraveled the parchment and skimmed over the glowing contents. He murmured through his findings as his eyes found them. When he was done, he rolled the parchment up, and set it to the side. It took its place next to an abundance of other paperwork on the massive desk.

“Well, we seem to have a predicament before us, don’t we, Private Anders?” the Battalion Commander said.

“I’m...I’m afraid I don’t follow, sir,” Anders said.

“Do you know what a lie of omission is, son?”

“Omission, sir?”

The officer sighed and looked up to the Senior Mage Instructor.

“It’s telling a lie by leaving something out on purpose, Recruit,” SSGT Teller said.

Anders’ eye welled again with tears, and his cheeks blushed bright red. Something shifted inside him, though, and his face hardened, squeezing the unwanted tears down his cheeks.

“Is this about my family, and my brother?”

“You say ‘sir’ when you’re addressing a commissioned officer, Private. Customs and Courtesies, remember? We haven’t kicked you out, yet,” SSGT Teller said, sudden menace in his tone.

“It’s alright, Sword Sergeant. Private Anders, let me inform you of what you’re facing. You’re accused of lying to the Mage Corps. A lie of omission. It’s an instant washout.”

“How, sir?”

“By failing to properly notify us of your next of kin. You presented yourself to us as an orphan, with no living relatives. Do you dispute that?”

“No...no, sir,” Anders said, his head held low.

“Very well, let the record show that the Private has admitted to the charges of Deception By Administrative Omission, as such,” the Colonel said, nodding to a transcription scroll hovering to the right of his desk. As he spoke, golden letters seared themselves into the hovering document.

“Do you admit that you are the youngest brother of Master Sergeant Brigham Anders? That your mother is Dinah Anders, your father Nephi Anders, and that both your parents are still alive and well in Mesquite, Nevada, along with your five other brothers and sisters?”

“I..I do, sir.”

“Well, son, that literally wraps this one up.”

The Lieutenant Colonel made a gesture, and the transcription scroll raveled up into a neat cylinder as it floated into his hand. He held it in front of him, rolling it between his fingers like a cigar. He used it to point towards the photo on the wall.

“I knew your brother. That’s him and me, during the Iceland campaign against that Fallen Necromancer Army, six years ago. He was one of my platoon sergeants, when I was a company commander with 4th Mages. Did you know that?”

“No, sir. That's the first time I've seen that photo,” Anders said, choking down the pain rising in his throat.

“All this,” the officer said, motioning to the scars around his head, “all this happened a few weeks before Reykjavik, before your brother stood in the gap. One of my forward patrol elements got itself ambushed. Your brother pulled me out of a burning golem armor and killed a Dark Saint who was trying to offer me up as a sacrifice to his gods.”

“Do you think he’d be proud of you, right now? For being here, in my office, under these circumstances?”

Anders gulped hard.

“No, sir.”

“Why didn’t you tell anyone about your brother?”

Anders put his head down, and a single tear flowed down his cheek. He brushed it off on his shoulder.

“I’ve lived in the shadow of Brigham Anders my whole life, sir. I just wanted to do something on my own. I wanted to prove...I don’t know...that I was good at more than just pushing up crops. Sir.”

“Do you want to go home? To bury your brother?”

“The Senior Mage Instructor said there’s not much to bury, sir. I love my brother, but I need to do this. I need to finish this, sir.”

“I can respect that. It’s not easy, growing up with someone like that in your life. Brigham was a good man. I owe him my life, and now he’s gone. I’m

sorry for your loss, because it's also my loss. I see no need to compound your problems, and if you're half the man your brother was, I think he'd agree with what I'm about to do. Sword Sergeant Teller," the Lieutenant Colonel said, setting the dictation scroll down on his desk.

The Senior Mage Instructor popped to attention.

"Do you have this man's training scroll?"

"Ah, no, sir, it's there, to your left, sir."

"Ah, correct. Damn paperwork. It's everywhere. It's the curse of moving up, and away from the field. I could build a gods-damn log cabin out of these things," the Battalion Commander said, sifting through the accumulated scrolls. He picked up Anders' service record and tossed it to SSGT Teller.

"Sword Sergeant, it appears this forlorn, confused recruit of yours failed to fill out his in-processing paperwork properly. It must have been the stress of mamma's apron strings being cut. Poor pup's probably never been past the county line. Wouldn't you agree, Senior Mage Instructor?"

SSGT Teller, his body still rigid at attention, made a motion with his eyes towards the dictation scroll.

"Ah, yes, well, paperwork tends to get lost. It happens, sometimes," the Colonel said. With a snap of his fingers, the parchment hovered up off his desk, and burst into flames.

Anders stood, a confused look on his face.

“Is there a problem, Private?”

“My folks, sir...I don't know what to do about them.”

“I'm be taking the transit stream to Nevada tonight. I'd like to express my condolences to your parents, in person. Shall I inform them that you're staying in mage recruit training, but wish you could be home? Or, do you wish to tell them, yourself?” the officer said, snapping his fingers again. The flames around the burning scroll disappeared, and the parchment was once again whole.

Anders' eyes hardened when they locked on the restored ticket home.

“That's very kind of you, sir. Please pass on to my folks that I love them. Please let mom know I'm sorry, but...but, my place is here,” Anders said.

“Very well, Private. Sword Sergeant, take charge of your recruit and execute the training orders of the day. You are both dismissed,” the Battalion Commander said. With a third snap of his fingers, the scroll burned at an accelerated rate, dissolving into ashes that drifted into a waiting ashtray. The officer went back to his paperwork, unrolling a scheduling order scroll for yet another revision.

SSGT Teller saluted, bringing the tip of his baton-wand to the edge of his instructor's helm, and took one step back. He did a smart pivot towards the door behind them, and paused, waiting for Anders to do the same. When the

standing recruit did not immediately echo the drill maneuver, the SMI shot him a quick sideways glance.

“Thank...thank you, sir.”

“Don't thank me yet, Private. You still have to make it through mage recruit training, war-hero-brother or not. Good luck, and good day,” the officer said, not looking up from his task.

SSGT Teller let out a combination cough and growl, jarring Anders from his goggled state. The Private's eyebrows shot up in surprise at his forgetfulness and the speed with which the ordeal ended. He took one step back and did an awkward about-face, trying not to bump into the animated chair.

The door opened for the two of them to exit into the hallway, then shut behind them with a polite, but firm, click.

“Well, that explains those magus scores, doesn't it, Private Anders?” SSGT Teller said.

“I--”

“This Recruit.”

“This Recruit didn't mean to lie to anyone, sir. This Recruit just wanted to prove he could make it on his own, sir.”

“We'll see. Like the man said, you're not done, not by a damn sight. Let's get back to the squad bay. I'm sure Mage Instructor Sergeant Eskola has all

sorts of signs and wonders for you to behold on his quarterdeck,” SSGT Teller said, a wry smirk on his face.

“Yes, sir,” Anders said, with a hint of dread.

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“Well, Private Farmboy, let's see if all that personal time with my training rock helped, or if you're still just at the stutter-and-flutter stage of flight training. Up the rope!” Mage Instructor Sergeant Eskola said, pointing to the top of the bell tower with his baton-wand.

“Yes, sir!” Anders said, bracing himself as he looked up at to the top of the obstacle and his goal. The combat-loaded runs were getting longer, the training routines more ingrained, and the punishments easier to bear.

Without looking, the ring of runestones flew from his combat belt to his hand, the light blue triangle already selected. The pain in his heaving side provided ample fuel, and he felt the power flow. It was just a matter of focusing, redirecting it, making it work to his advantage.

There was a moment of lightness, his hand reached out, and the bell's tone rang deep and strong across the width of the confidence course. Anders took in the view, grinning at the upturned faces on the ground. He caught the eye of SSGT Teller at the base of another obstacle. The Senior Mage Instructor

nodded in acknowledgment, then returned to his shouted commands at the recruits on his own challenging structure.

“Well, hello, are we sightseeing up there?” SGT Eskola's voice thundered from beneath him.

“Did you transform into a cat stuck up a tree, Private Farmboy? Afraid to come down, now? Make your controlled descent and get moving to my next obstacle. Move!”