

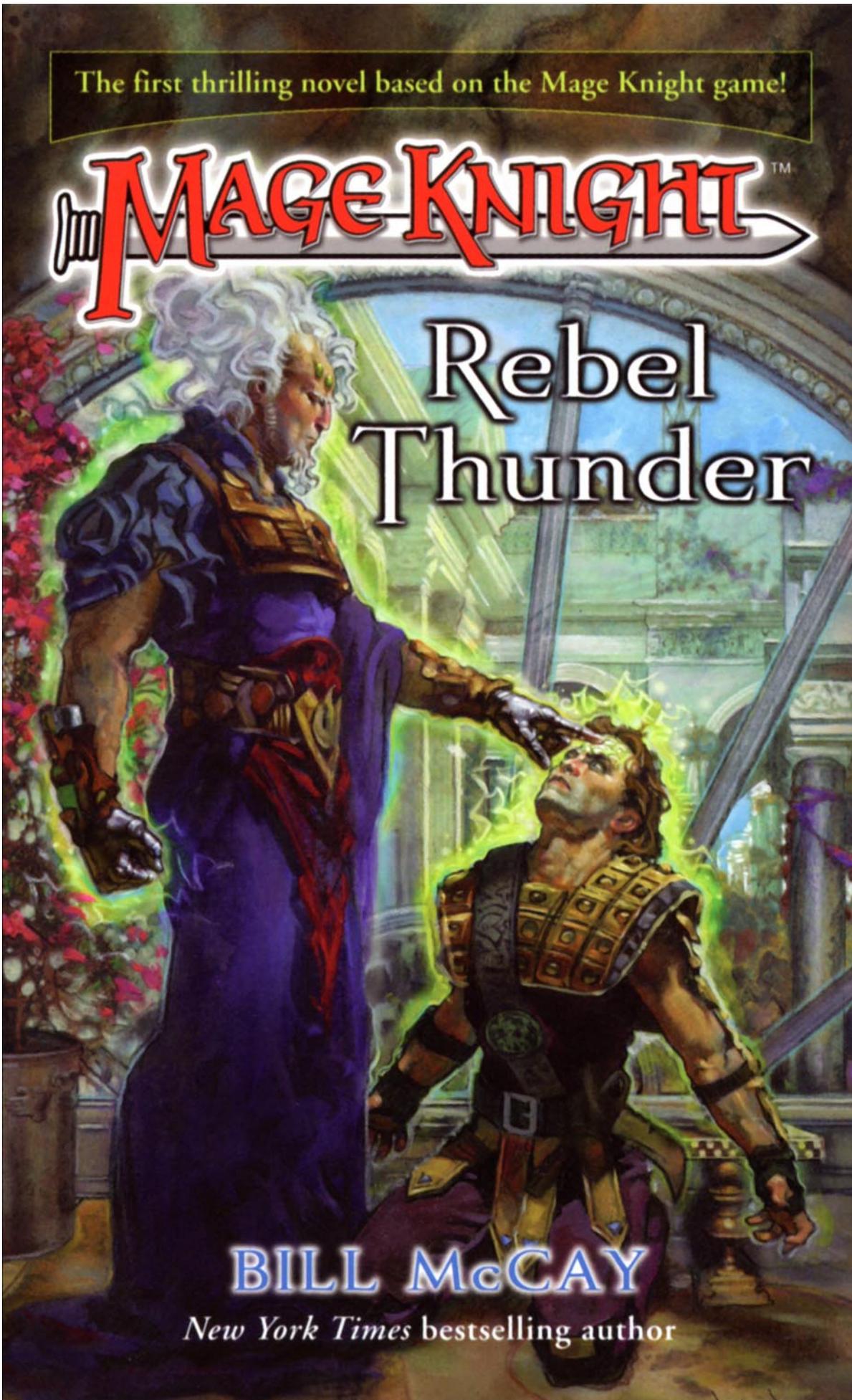
The first thrilling novel based on the Mage Knight game!

MAGE KNIGHT™

Rebel Thunder

BILL McCAY

New York Times bestselling author



Chapter 1

Blaize Audrick's son, altem guardsman of the Atlantean Empire, squinted in the bright sunlight beating down on the arena. It was hot in the padded practice jerkins he and his squad wore. But the brilliance was worse as it glinted off the raked sand underfoot, the rising ranks of polished marble seats, and the huge crystal statues of beasts and warriors. The arena seemed like a vast, shining bowl, concentrating heat and light down upon them.

"A bit easier to take from the stands than the sands," Blaize quipped.

"As though you ever sat in those seats," Utem Guardsman Jacot said, as he leaned against his pike, hawked, and spat.

Some altems would have knocked down a subordinate for talking like that. Blaize merely shrugged. The guardsman wasn't in his usual squad, and it was doubtful that a thrashing would improve Jacot's performance in this practice bout. "I've stood at attention along those steps often enough," he answered mildly.

"Have you ever stood guard—" Colass, the rawest recruit of the four guardsmen in the arena, nodded in awe toward the Imperial Box.

"Oh, we broil often enough at the edge of the emperor's awning." Jacot's voice sounded even coarser than usual as he laughed.

"The better post is up there." He gestured to an opening inset like a cave in the gleaming marble. "That's where the prophet-magus watches the games—when he deigns."

Machau, the other pikeman, joined in the laughter. Blaize said nothing as he checked his crossbow. But he wondered at the orders that had brought them together—two barely competent utems, a raw recruit . . . and himself.

The command to appear here—and which weapons to draw—had caught them all at breakfast. It might be a punishment detail. The question was, for whom?

"Looks like you've been demoted to the level of us utem guardsmen, sir." Jacot's joshing tone didn't hide the nasty light of mockery in his eyes. "Guess the Powers hope you'll teach the boy something," he went on, gesturing at the weapons Blaize and Colass held.

“Utem crossbowmen have their parts to play,” Blaize replied easily. On the battlefield, the Atlantean army was as powerful a machine as any mage’s Technomantic creation. Hollow squares of pikemen provided the basic defensive arm, protecting mage-officers with a wall of human flesh and spears. At each corner of the square, bastions of crossbowmen and specialist troops with Technomantic weapons provided ranged fire. And once the magic blasts, lightning, and mage fire had broken the enemy’s line, the pikemen dropped their pole arms and followed the altem guardsmen to finish the job with their blades.

But an altem guardsman was supposed to be able to master any weapon found on the battlefield, so Blaize had practiced with crossbows and everything else available in the guardsmen’s armories.

Jacot’s strongest weapon, on the other hand, is his mouth. Blaize kept that thought unspoken. It was never wise to argue with squadmates before combat—even practice combat.

The fact was that Jacot and Machau looked like the awkward squad with their twelve-foot pikes. Spears that long weren’t handy for guardsmen patrolling the cramped, twisting alleyways of Down Town. Short-hafted darts were better suited either as missiles or close-in weapons. And when reversed, their weighted ends worked well as truncheons on obstreperous Down-Towner heads.

Blaize turned from the wobbling pik shafts to Colass. At least the kid seemed to know which end of his crossbow the bolt flew from.

Pikes were best against mounted troops, Blaize knew. So what would they be up against? Cavalry? Captured Orcs?

At the far end of the arena, two sets of ironbound doors swung open, and Blaize got his answer.

Mage Spawn—one tall and stocky, the other crouched and lithe. Both were covered in matted, filthy fur. But they stood on their hind legs in a monstrous parody of humanity as they blinked in the sudden sunlight. *A Werebear and a Werewolf*, Blaize thought. *We are in deep Troll scat!*

The Werebear was a nine-foot slab of shaggy muscle. Its snout wrinkled as it snuffled in air, depending more on smell than on its weak eyes. Blaize saw precisely when the beast caught human-scent in the air. The creature roared, raising its forepaws in fists larger than a man’s head. The fingers spread out to reveal claws several inches long. The bear-beast’s Mage Spawn companion was less demonstrative, curling in on itself while it took in the human quartet. But the Werewolf’s eyes blazed like the green fires in Feshku’s Pit of Perdition. And a bilious string of slobber dribbled from the corner of its mouth to steam on the hot sands—hunger-drool.

The width of the arena separated the creatures from Blaize’s squad—a good hundred paces. But the altem knew the Mage Spawn could close that distance all too soon.

These need a quick finish, Blaize told himself. Their bloodlust rises the longer they fight. Aloud, he said, “Colass, you aim for the wolf. I’ll take the bigger one.”

Even as he spoke, he triggered his crossbow. His bolt took the Werebear in its muscle-ridged belly. The beast raked claws across its own flesh, trying to dislodge the missile. Blaize caught his bow under one foot, using his stronger leg muscles as a lever to help him cock the weapon. He was up and reloaded as the abomination before him flung back its head and roared its rage.

Blaize’s second shot drilled the beast in its throat and disappeared, penetrating flesh and entering the skull from below. That was damage even the Mage Spawn’s unnatural vitality couldn’t shake off. Master Werebear dropped, twitching.

Through all this, Colass’ bow had wavered while he tried to force trembling hands to take aim. His shot wasn’t bad—it should have caught the oncoming Werewolf in the chest. But the beast’s advance was a twisting, sinuous lope—a tribute to its legendary skills at evasion.

The Mage Spawn’s shoulder dipped just as Colass’ shot reached it. The crossbow quarrel tore a red stripe across hairy, muscular flesh. Wolf-like, the Spawn snapped at the pain. But it kept coming.

This was the moment the two pikes should have come down to threaten the beast’s chest, keeping it at bay.

Instead, Jacot revealed himself to be a worse soldier than Blaize had ever expected.

“Tezla’s knob,” the veteran guardsman croaked. But then the blasphemy was forgotten in the wake of a worse sin. Jacot dropped his weapon and ran. Machau stared after his comrade instead of paying attention to his spearpoint. It wavered off-line of the Werewolf’s chest. The Mage Spawn dashed in, batting the heavy pike aside. Machau held on to the shaft an instant too long.

The Werewolf was on the utem before Machau’s sword was half out of its scabbard. Still worse, even as the Werewolf’s claws disemboweled him, the guardsman’s body blocked Blaize’s shot.

Colass tried to stand by his training, struggling with the string of his crossbow. But when Machau fell, the recruit dropped the weapon and ran for it.

Exercise over, Blaize thought in disgust, waiting for the twang of crossbow fire from the back-up archers posted in the first tier of arena seats, usually followed by a volley of pointed insults for the guardsmen in need of rescue.

Neither came. Blaize glanced up to find no bowmen on duty. His squad was on its own, and the wolf-beast was almost upon him.

But it paid no attention to him, charging on in its strange, twisting lope. Blaize tried for a snap-shot but missed as the werewolf ran past him, focused completely on the boy. Whether it was after the one who’d caused it pain or just attracted by a running figure, Blaize had no idea. Before he could reload again, the mage-beast was on Colass.

Human screams blended with the Werewolf’s triumphant snarl. Blaize unsheathed his sword and went for the furred back. All the guardsmen had been issued leaf-bladed short swords, more effective for close-in fighting on city streets than for subduing savage Mage Spawn in the arena.

A manacle blade would be better for this kind of butchery, Blaize thought coldly as he brought his arm down in a quick cross-slash, laying open muscle and sinew beneath the fur.

With a bellow of surprise, the beast twisted around nearly snake-like, snapping at the annoyance. Carrion breath blasted in Blaize’s face, a combination of rotten meat and fresh blood. He brought his blade around again, aiming for the Werewolf’s snout already red with Colass’ gore. Blaize added some of the beast’s own blood to the mix as his steel bit into the Werewolf’s flesh.

The monster recoiled, then leaped to attack. Blaize dove under the threatening fangs and claws, his short sword up to administer a long, shallow graze along the Werewolf’s underbelly.

Almost past, the wolf-thing’s rear leg connected in a buffeting blow, sending Blaize sprawling on the burning sands. He managed to hold on to his sword and made it to his feet before the beast came at him again.

The next few moments swirled by in a wild, scrambling retreat as the Werewolf feinted and hurtled about. The wide-open space around them left the creature free to circle the altem, trying for an attack from the flank or rear. Blaize grimly kept turning to face the rank monstrosity, so each attack became an attempt to get past his short blade. The Werewolf didn’t succeed—quite. But Blaize couldn’t put the beast down. He inflicted a few more nicks and cuts, receiving some bruises, scrapes, and a bloody but shallow quartet of gashes across his back.

His padded practice jerkin had taken the brunt of that swipe. Half the garment now hung in shreds, its stuffing leaking out—except where it was soaking up the fluids leaking from Blaize.

He shook his head, trying to keep the burning sweat out of his eyes. With a comrade at his side—or at least guarding his back—he might have a better chance.

Machau is lying in a puddle of his own intestines, a cold, tactical voice came from the back of Blaize’s head. *Colass is down and not getting up.*

He was vaguely aware of a yammering voice and the sound of fists pounding on the door that had let them into the arena. So Jacot was alive—but useless.

It was up to Blaize to kill the Werewolf, and he was running out of time, energy . . . and blood. Already

he felt light headed. Was that heat-haze coming off the arena sands, or was his vision blurring? He backed off a little more, trying to put some additional distance between himself and the Mage Spawn.

Blaize's foot came up against something—the shaft of one of the abandoned pikes. Risking a quick glance, he saw that he was halfway down the length of the spear, and that the head pointed toward the Werewolf.

It was time to roll the bones on a desperate chance. Blaize pretended to trip over the pike, dropping to one knee. Howling with triumph, the Werewolf vaulted forward. Blaize grabbed the pikestaff and hauled it up, bracing himself as best he could.

The spearhead caught the wolf-beast in the upper right chest, converting the victory howl into a bloody wheeze. But this was a war-weapon, not a hunting spear, that the Werewolf had impaled itself upon. There was no crossbar to keep it from walking its way up the weapon to reach Blaize.

And that is what, slowly, painfully, the Mage Spawn attempted to do.

Blaize retreated to the end of the pikestaff, which he braced with one foot. Then he brought his other foot down as heavily as he could on the shaft. With a hoarse bellow of pain, the Werewolf toppled. Even as it thudded to the ground, Blaize flung himself forward, blade extended.

The point of the short sword found the Werewolf's left eye and plunged in. The beast stiffened in a convulsive shudder, then lay still.

Blaize pulled his blade free and took a couple of wobbly steps back. For the past couple of minutes, his whole world had shrunk to the wolf-thing's face, its eyes, its claws, trying to judge where the next attack would come from, how it would be launched. Now Blaize stood staggering in the midst of a rapidly expanding universe. The stepped bowl of marble seats and the triumphantly posed crystal statues—Archer, Swordsman, Elf at Bay, the Wounded Troll—all seemed to act like a gigantic lens, boiling the sweat from his streaming body.

He saw stretcher-bearers kneeling in bloodstained sand, tidying Machau away, gently lifting Colass onto a litter. Farther away, a squad of guardsmen took Jacot into custody. Still farther away, arena groundsmen emerged from the menagerie doors with chains to haul away the dead Mage Spawn.

Another altem guard—a grizzled veteran, but in polished armor—approached Blaize across the sands.

“Guardsmen Blaize, you will accompany me and report to your commander,” he said, “immediately.”

Blaize saluted, then plunged his sword into the sand to clean it as best he could. He wiped off the gritty, clotted weapon on his practice jerkin, sheathed the sword, and followed.

Orders.

But also, it would be good to see Magus Emillon and report about practices that took the lives of young recruits—practices where back-up guardsmen were not at their posts.

Following the headquarters guardsman, Blaize marched across the sands to a break in the arena wall, a section removed to allow them to climb up to the first row of seats. Another twelve tiers of seating slabs rose up in concentric oblongs of marble—not enough to accommodate the full population of Atlantis-in-the-Sky, but more than ample for the Empire's elite.

Blackness yawned before them, and they stepped into the shadow of a passageway, finally emerging into sunshine at the portico surrounding the front of arena's curved outer wall, where the paying customers—or, rather, invited guests—usually entered.

The street outside was not made of gold as the legends claimed. But the silica-rich paving stones reflected the midday sun's glare almost as harshly as the sands in the arena.

Blaize glanced back as they set off down the greatest street in the Empire. The arched facade of the arena, rising in spotless white marble, would have stood out in almost any other milieu.

But on the Golden Mile, the glittering core of the Empire's heart, the vast structure usually got only a passing glance. When Grand Magus Tezla raised four square miles of his capital five hundred feet into the air, he'd chosen the sections with the most impressive architecture. And in the 140 years since Tezla

discarnated, succeeding emperors had lavished the finest building materials in the Land upon Atlantis-in-the-Sky. On this street, more than matchless marble was needed to catch the eye.

The wonders of Technomancy allowed crystals—even gemstones—to be fused or fashioned into structural elements. They passed Orien’s Fountain, which seemed to be crafted from a single, tremendous piece of lapis lazuli. Visitors to the Chapel of Heroes entered through a facade of gigantic jade panels that depicted warlike deeds. Tezla’s soaring temple was fronted by ten enormous columns, rising not in barreled sections but as single alexandrite crystals, shining red or green as the light fell upon them.

Spires and obelisks were raised using newer Technomantic skills, cladding Magestone with veneers of other crystals to create edifices that seemed to glow from within.

Unlimited tax monies, labor, and magic allowed the rulers of Atlantis to pile wonder upon wonder. Even the aristocrats of the Land’s other great cities gaped like peasants at the display.

The locals, however, made their way past these titanic works like ants traversing the feet of a grand statue, eyes down, usually oblivious in the grip of their own business. It took the unveiling of some new wonder to capture their attention, unless they were passing some personal favorite.

Following his guide along the Golden Mile, Blaize came upon a construction that had taken his fancy. A teacher from the Academy had taken Blaize’s upper-form class out to examine some of the more neglected monuments on the Golden Mile. He’d pointed out the massive stone structure spanning the street, calling it the Altered Arch.

The schoolmaster explained that the Arch had been raised more than 250 years ago, intended as a triumphal memorial for Tezla’s attack on the Knights Immortal. That campaign failed at the Battle of South Pass, but the Arch, covered with scenes of victory over the Elves, was already in place. Rather than tear the thing down, artisans had changed the carvings to show Wylden followers of renegade Elemental mages facing Imperial justice.

But, as the teacher pointed out to the Academy students, the sculpted battle scenes still included many High Elves fighting in the ranks of the Empire’s enemies.

The suggestion that even Tezla could be fallible had fascinated Blaize. A number of parents, however, had complained about this lesson. And shortly afterward, the offending teacher had been dismissed from the Academy.

From the shadow of the Arch, they moved away from the Golden Mile, skirting the edge of the Lower Forum. Dotted with heroic statues of Tezla and later emperors, and lined with the offices of the Lesser Ministries, this space would have crowned many a lesser city. Compared to the splendors they’d just left, the gold, silver, and marble seemed almost homely. The building facades of the various offices still gleamed in white marble, with colonnades and pediments of polished stone. Even the tiered steps leading up to each building were carved from single blocks of marble, each riser an inch higher than a comfortable step. Not only did it make for a more impressive vista, but it also taxed that much more effort from the suppliants coming to the offices.

Those who worked in the Ministries—Blaize’s father among them—entered the buildings through rear basements, making their way to their places of business on much more comfortable back stairways.

Certainly there were more than enough suppliants thronging the forum, with drabber-robed government functionaries bustling among them. Then the guardsmen were beyond the open space, following the street into a residential district of “island-castles.”

Having grown up in a building like these, Blaize knew they were neither islands nor castles, but large blocks of cramped apartments stretching fortress-like from one street to the next. A narrow center court in the middle of each building was lucky to get full sunlight for half an hour each midday. The places were sweltering in summer heat, freezing in winter winds.

They also represented the only home Blaize had ever known before coming to the guardsmen’s barracks.

And now they were close to those barracks, entering one of the military zones surrounding the lift-gates that allowed access to the city.

Instead of leading the way to the company area for Blaize's unit, the veteran led his charge to a different building, a much larger office. Blaize immediately became alert, as veterans do at any change in routine.

Magus Emillon was already in the office, his hair carefully coifed, revealing the single Magestone implanted in his forehead—his true sign of rank, marking him as a magic-wielder for the Empire. Golden armor shone over his dull red uniform, but he carried neither his sword nor his magical staff. Emillon was young for an officer, really an elite magical apprentice. At the moment, his bony face looked even younger as he stood as erect as any recruit in front of the desk. Behind it sat a hawk-faced man whom Blaize had seen only at major parades—Lord Scarbro, commander of Capital Defense Legion.

From the looks of Magus Emillon, it was turning into a hard day for guardsmen in Blaize's unit. The young mage usually presented a pale, ascetic facade to the world. Today, his face looked waxy, the dark roots of his freshly scraped beard showing through the flesh.

"Guardsmen Blaize," the veteran announced, then left.

"That was a fairly eventful practice bout," Scarbro said. "Two guardsmen dead and a third arrested for dereliction—"

"But the test was for Blaize," Emillon said a little too quickly. "The others in the exercise were supposed to be expendable."

Blaize knew better than to open his mouth. The lesson was outlined in the first Imperial Precepts taught in school, supposedly handed down by the Grand Magus Tezla himself: "A Superior speaks with the authority of a father. A Subordinate's duty is to hear . . . and obey."

This wasn't about negligence in setting guards or failures of safety. The morning had been a test, which Blaize had apparently passed. What if Jacot, Machau, and Colass had used their weapons with more effect? Would they have passed, too? Blaize ached to tell the officer that Colass hadn't been expendable; he'd merely been young. But even phrased with respect, Blaize knew his words would be unwelcome.

Was this a test now? Was he expected to speak or keep quiet?

"Guardsmen Blaize dispatched two Mage Spawn essentially single handedly." As Emillon spoke, Blaize noted a fine sheen of sweat on the mage's face. That was the first time he'd ever seen such a reaction from one of the magically gifted to someone without magic, which is what Scarbro essentially was. The magus also seemed to keep glancing to his right. Blaize followed Emillon's nervous gaze to see another entrance to the office—or maybe some sort of closet or storage space. It was an opening in the wall blocked with an embroidered tapestry.

The hanging billowed slightly as Blaize looked. Could someone be listening behind there? Had Emillon's powers somehow divined another's presence? But who would make the young mage more nervous than the capital's commanding officer?

Emillon's words tumbled over themselves as he continued. "Besides the bravery expected of an altem guardsman, he also showed exceptional skill with several unorthodox weapons—crossbow, pike, short sword—"

"Most commendable, magus," Scarbro said crisply. "You are dismissed."

Saluting, Blaize went to follow his commander, then halted as Scarbro said, "Not you, guardsman."

Blaize resumed his stance as Emillon hesitated in the doorway. He was an exception to the usual run of mage-officers, who threw their troops into harm's way as gamesters discard pawns. Although he looked as if he'd be happy to scuttle off, Emillon nevertheless showed a commander's responsibility. "Sir, this guardsman is in my company."

"He is now on detached duty," the Legion-captain replied.

The young mage swallowed loudly. "Serving where, sir?"

Scarbro's hawk-face looked like a graven image. "Serving the Empire," he said with an air of finality. Bowing his head, Emillon left.

The hanging fluttered aside as a new figure entered the room. Scarbro rose from behind his desk and bowed. "You heard, my lord?"

A new note entered the warlord's voice—the same sort of careful, eager-to-please tone Blaize had heard from Emillon.

"I not only heard, Lord Scarbro, but I also saw. A scrying-stone was set to overlook the arena. I watched the entire test." The newcomer fell silent, but Blaize had the impression of a long, searching scrutiny. He remained at attention, unable to turn his head to return the look. From the tail of his eye, he got a glimpse of purple and gold—the colors of a senior mage's robes of state.

"Excellent combat reactions, and his improvisation showed a certain quickness of wit." The mage stepped into Blaize's range of vision, his hair and beard a pure white, with thin lips set in a considering frown. Deep-set eyes of iron gray continued to regard Blaize as if searching for a flaw. Slowly, the robed figure circled. Blaize took in the high forehead, bold cheekbones, the jutting beak of a nose. Every line of the mage's face shouted power—and arrogance.

The very air seemed to curdle with strange energies circling the tall, spare figure. Invisible currents tugged at robes whose silk reduced any other fabrics Blaize had seen to the status of sackcloth. Even the man's mane of white hair stirred in the grip of an unseen aura.

This morning's business had brought Blaize to rarefied heights, indeed. His examiner had to be a personage of importance within the Atlantis Guild—and within the Empire itself.

The mage glanced toward Scarbro. "Can we trust him?" he asked as if Blaize weren't there.

Scarbro answered as quickly as Emillon had. "Born and raised here within the floating city, lord. Educated through the secondary forms at the Academy. Several tours in the outlands, west and north. A true son of Atlantis."

"As we might expect." The mage stepped forward. His aquiline features, tight as a fist, filled Blaize's view. The altem felt his body sway, only iron discipline keeping him upright. Had he counted four Magestones set in the magus' brow? Or had his vision gone weak as his knees?

All he saw now were the mage's flashing iron eyes. They seemed to press into his very soul. Strange, skittering sensations tickled behind Blaize's brow, like spiders dancing on flesh—or very delicate, immaterial fingers rifling through his thoughts and memories. The mage's left hand cupped the back of Blaize's skull, holding him in place, keeping him upright.

"Yes. I read all you say, and more. This one is acceptable." The mage stepped back, releasing Blaize, who promptly collapsed to his knees like a puppet with its strings cut.

He strove for balance, struggling to prevent himself from pitching face forward onto the floor. A hand in a silver glove rose before his eyes. Silver? Only one mage in all the Empire wore those, or had four Magestone implants—

Blaize's whirling thoughts were interrupted as a metal-clad finger came to rest on his forehead. That uncanny insect-skitter penetrated his skull, danced deep into his brain, and the world grew very far away.

Then a bolt very much like lightning seemed to pass from the mage to the kneeling altem. Though the contact was only a fingertip, it seemed to deal Blaize a blow far worse than any he had ever received in practice or in combat.

Blaize flopped backward, his whole brow aflame.

"Done," the mage said.

The word echoed between Blaize's ears as he crashed against the office floor.