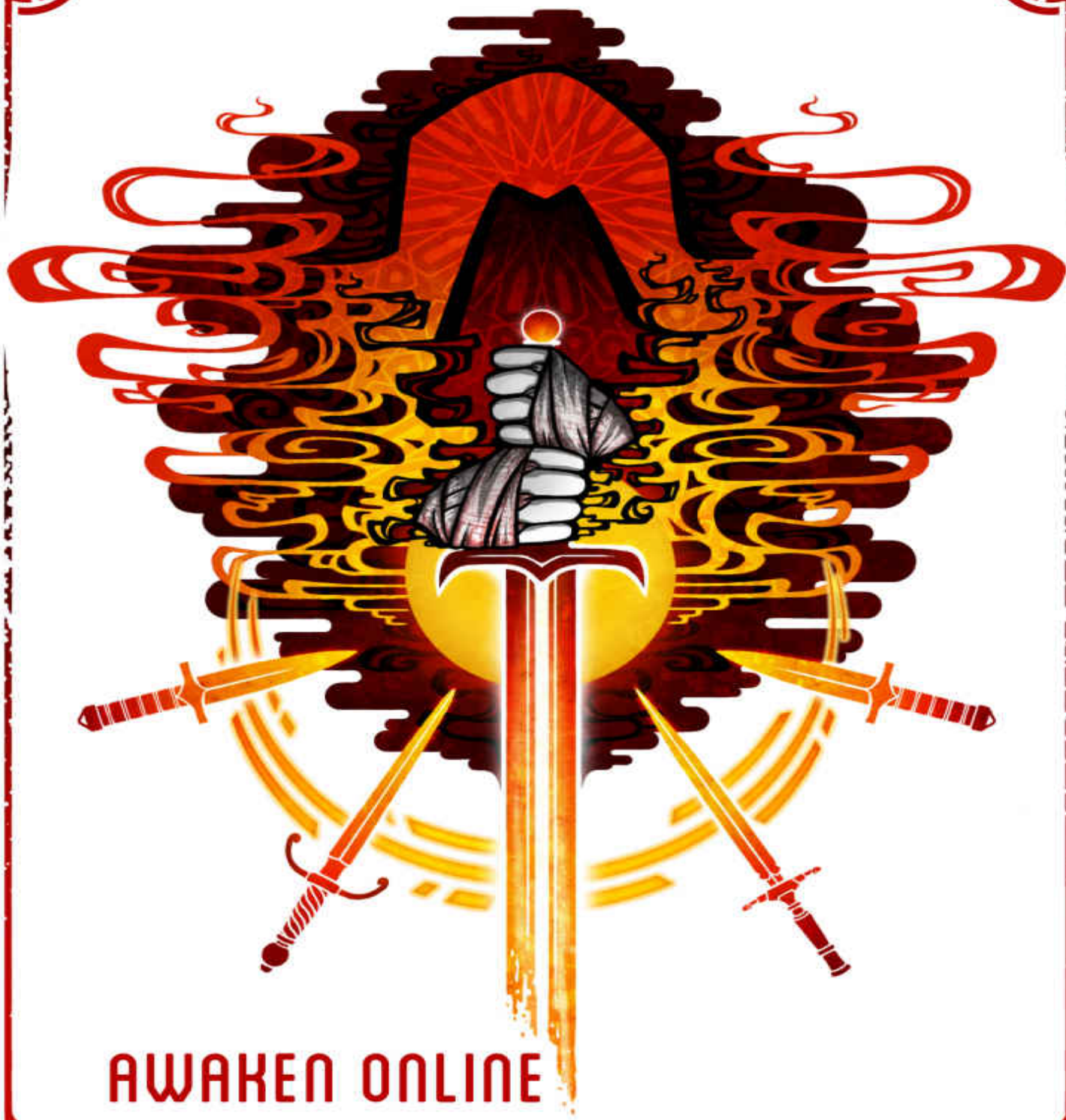


— TRAVIS BAGWELL —



AWAKEN ONLINE

FLAME

TAROT BOOK TWO

Awaken Online

Tarot Book 2: Flame

Travis Bagwell

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To my wife... okay, so maybe Rachael has *some* similarities to you. And no, you shouldn't be worried about me recording your voice. Those electrodes on your temples are also just cosmetic.

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Prologue

13 years before the release of Awaken Online.

Finn had never understood farmers markets.

Rows of haphazardly placed tents filled with fresh fruits and vegetables – that part made sense. It was the junk crammed between the produce stands that made him scratch his head. An ancient bicycle, its chain long since rusted into a solid object. Antiques and relics from a previous century, their surfaces worn down by unfriendly decades. Poorly printed t-shirts. A dog constructed entirely of scrap metal, half-heartedly coated in chipped paint – perhaps to showcase that the artificial animal had weathered some sort of apocalypse.

How many *artisanal, locally sourced* candles did a person really need?

And yet here he was.

Finn meandered down those rows of tents, which seemed to stretch on infinitely, bodies crammed into a narrow passage between the structures. Every time he paused or dawdled, he was tugged forward – his hand clasped firmly in Rachael's. There it was: a reason for being here. And two more little reasons darted ahead of them to check out the next tent, Gracen and Julia chattering to themselves.

The next stall appeared to be selling artwork. Judging from the unusual dimensions of the pictures, Finn assumed he was either looking at the next Picasso – or, far more likely – a student who had decided to peddle their treasured projects to other people.

Finn felt Rachael squeeze his hand, her fingers absently fiddling with a small white scar at the base of his thumb like she always did. “You’re scowling,” she whispered, a hint of laughter in her voice.

“Just properly appraising the majesty of this painting. The brushwork, the delicate color palette...” Finn retorted. He paused as he

squinted at the canvas. “If you unfocus your eyes, it actually looks like an evil clown.”

Rachael snorted out a laugh, but quickly stopped herself as she saw the stall owner’s eyes skim across them. “Behave,” she snapped at Finn, smacking his shoulder, but there was little force behind the words or the slap.

“I’ve got a much better idea. If you buy one of those repurposed bullet necklaces at the stall over there and then one of those antique guns from that guy we passed, you could just put me out of my misery.”

Rachael shook her head, trying and failing to suppress a laugh. “You know, this is supposed to be *family time*. It’s one of the few times we all get to see you.”

Finn nodded solemnly. “You’re right. Buy a few bullets then. We’ll die as a family.”

“Hilarious. You know what, try this.” Rachael snatched something from a nearby stall and twirled back to him. He opened his mouth to ask what she was doing, and she promptly shoved a small spoon into it.

Within seconds, it felt like Finn’s tongue was on fire. He choked, looking around frantically for somewhere to spit out whatever poison she had fed him. Not seeing any options, he was forced to choke it down. The substance left a burning trail as it slid down his throat.

“What... what the hell was that?”

“Jam,” Rachael replied, barely holding back a laugh as she watched him.

“No way!” Finn gasped.

She glanced over at the nearby stall and the array of samples that were spread out across the table. “Yep. Triple Ghost Pepper Inferno... Strawberry.” Even the owner was chuckling as he watched the exchange.

“The strawberry is subtle,” Finn bit out, his eyes tearing up as they skimmed the crowd. What the hell was the point of “*lava jam*,” anyway? Only at a farmers market... But now he had a mission, at least. He needed to find some beer.

However, Finn was interrupted in his quest as their children came running back, Julia in the lead and Gracen's taller gangly form trudging along behind her. Julia snatched at Finn's hand, peering up at him excitedly. "Daddy, there's a band! Dance with me?"

Finn followed her finger to see that a clearing opened ahead, the junk-filled tents ringed a makeshift dance floor and the tang of country music drifting through the air. Finn's expression softened. "Sure thing, honey..." He trailed off as he felt the device on his wrist vibrate. He tapped at the surface and saw a familiar name scrawled across the display.

George Lane. *Shit.*

"Just one second," Finn said to Julia, raising a finger. He could see the light in her eyes dim, a frown tugging at her lips.

"It's Saturday morning," Rachael interjected, glancing at the phone. "Can't it wait?" Finn could detect the sharpness in her voice – all trace of amusement gone in a flash.

"It has to be some sort of emergency," Finn replied, glancing back down at the device. "Otherwise, why would he call?"

Rachael just stared at him incredulously, giving him that *look* – the one that conveyed volumes in an instant. *It's always an emergency*, it said.

"I'll just be a second," Finn said, before turning back to Julia and gesturing at the dance floor. "Your mom can fill in for me in the meantime. She's a better dancer anyway."

Julia's eyes lit up, and she grabbed her mother's hand, tugging her toward the dance floor with surprising strength for a child. "You owe me," Rachael mouthed at Finn before the group headed off towards the clearing. He nodded and gave her a lopsided smile.

Finn tapped at the implant just below his right ear. "Hello, Mr. Harris," a feminine voice spoke up immediately. "Please give me a moment to connect Mr. Lane."

"Thank you," Finn responded distractedly, staring off after his family. He watched as his wife spun their daughter around the dance floor. He saw the smiles on their faces, the way their eyes seemed to shine, reflecting the

soft morning sunlight. Gracen stood on the sidelines. He was just old enough now to be too cool to join his mother and sister, but he still watched their fun with poorly concealed interest.

He felt a pang then. Of regret; of indecision. He could just hang up the phone, ignore the call. Blame it on poor reception. George could survive for a day. And he almost did...

Yet before he could move, Finn heard a faint click, and George's voice echoed across the line, "Hi Finn, do you have a moment to talk?"

"Yeah... yeah, what's going on?" Finn asked, turning away from his family.

There would always be another time – another day, another market. Rachael and the kids could wait for a few minutes while he took care of this.

Chapter 1 - Burning

Finn stood still, his palms together, his muscles loose, and his breathing even. The tips of his fingers slowly traced the faint scar at the base of his thumb. It was strange how real *Awaken Online* felt to him now. Even his scars – nicks and dents earned in the real world – they followed him here.

A faint dusting of sand drifted across the courtyard, carried by a light breeze. The particles slid around his ankles, the only movement that broke the tension that hovered over the field. His eyes shone with a glowing orange light as he took in the three mages surrounding him – their weapons held tightly and their expressions grim.

At some unspoken signal, they moved in unison.

A flash of sapphire light signaled an *Ice Bolt* slicing toward Finn's head. Launching himself into a spin, he narrowly avoided the missile, even as his fingers blazed through a flurry of movements. He fell into the momentum of the spin, and his feet made contact with a lance of stone that erupted from the ground, pushing backward and sliding behind another pillar as it launched from the sands.

Lightning slammed against the other side of the stone, forks of energy spearing along either side of the column and scorching the sand. The blast left half-melted puddles of glass in its wake. Finn tilted his head as he saw the effect of the lightning. That gave him an idea, and he could feel his blood boiling in anticipation as his mana responded, barely able to restrain the sensation. He just needed a bit more time.

A few heartbeats later, he had completed his spell, and his daggers slid from their sheaths, flames rippling along the metal. His fingers never stopped moving, channeling mana into the spell to keep the blades aloft.

Finn darted out from behind his makeshift cover. Leaping into the air, he spun over another bolt of ice and hit the ground with a soft thump. He kicked at the sand as he landed, sending a spray of loose particles

sweeping forward. Meanwhile, his fingers directed his blades. They rocketed through the cloud, the flames melting the sand and forming globes of molten glass that hurtled forward.

The air mage's eyes widened in alarm, and he began to raise his arm to block the spray.

It was too late.

He let out a scream as the searing material coated his face. Streamers of smoke curled between his frantic fingers, as he clawed at his eyes in a vain attempt to remove the molten glass. Finn swiftly capitalized on the moment of weakness, his blades slicing through the tendons in the man's arms. The mage soon crumpled to his knees, his hands hanging limp and useless, as his blood dripped onto the sand.

One down. Two to go.

Finn hadn't stopped moving even as his blades cut into the air mage. He whirled toward the other two mages, who backpedaled quickly. Clusters of glowing runes appeared along the sands only to vanish a moment later, signaling that the water mage was building a defensive line of traps.

"Daniel," Finn murmured.

"I'm on it, sir," the AI replied from where he hovered above Finn's shoulder. Glowing outlines soon appeared in Finn's vision, marking each trap.

Without hesitation, he raced forward, weaving a trail between the highlighted patches. The remaining mages saw that the defenses weren't working; they were only slowing Finn down. The water mage began summoning a flurry of *Ice Bolts* to put more pressure on him, but Finn dodged and danced around the missiles as they raced past, keeping his daggers close in case the earth mage intervened. He could already see that the other man's fingers were winding through a more complicated spell.

Journeyman level, at least. But he didn't recognize the incantation or gestures.

Another barrage of ice soon followed, yet Finn neatly avoided the missiles. He needed to wait. His eyes were on the glowing line that marked

the edge of his control range as it sped closer to his two opponents.

Then the earth mage finished his spell, and something unexpected happened.

A surge of green energy rippled through the air, and Finn felt a forceful *tug* that continued to grow in strength with each passing second, yanking him toward the mages. He quickly slid to a halt, resisting the gravitational pull before it could inadvertently drag him across a trap. Even so, his feet were still sliding along the sand as the pressure continued to mount. The earth mage must have been actively channeling the spell.

“Danger! Attack from 6 o’clock,” Daniel chirped.

Finn tilted his head slightly. He could see that the AOE *Pull* had caught the *Ice Bolts* Finn had dodged, causing nearly a dozen missiles to pivot in the air and speed back toward him – the projectiles accelerating rapidly. Even worse, Finn could see the water mage readying another spell.

Time seemed to slow for a fraction of a second, and Finn’s thoughts raced.

Then he landed on his only option.

Finn stopped fighting the *Pull* and launched himself into the air, letting the gravitational anomaly send him hurtling forward. He directed a blade downward, and it went skimming along the surface of a trap. Lances of ice rocketed into the air, just barely missing Finn and creating a frozen wall to his back. The *Ice Bolts* trailing behind him slammed against the barrier, and the wall fractured under the combined impact. Then the icy missiles exploded, forming an even larger frozen block and trapping one of Finn’s blades.

However, Finn was already gone, speeding directly toward the two mages.

The earth mage’s mouth dropped open, and his fingers scrambled to construct an earthen barrier as the water mage abruptly stopped her spell. But Finn knew how to handle the wall after fighting Kyyle. A molten substance soon coated his left shoulder, spikes of magma arching away from

his skin as his *Magma Armor* slid into place. He curled and pivoted in the air, his shoulder crashing into the newly formed dirt.

He exploded through the wall, hit the ground in a roll, and his lone blade arced forward, cutting through the muscle and tendons in the water mage's ankles. She went down hard, hitting the sand with a thump. His follow-up strike left her arms dangling uselessly and her bright crimson blood leaking onto the sand.

Finn rolled back to his feet, pivoting to avoid a swing of the earth mage's staff. He kicked the weapon to the side, stepped in close, and slammed an armored fist against the mage's stomach. A soft whoosh of air escaped the man's lips, and he stumbled backward. However, Finn pressed forward, grabbing the mage's free arm, and twisting it up and behind his back until his elbow locked and began to bow. Finn's free blade then slid into place, its tip against the man's neck, just barely scratching his Adam's apple.

The earth mage froze, feeling the hot metal sizzling against his skin.

"Do you yield?" Finn asked calmly.

The man's attention flicked to the other two mages, who lay crumpled along the sands, slowly bleeding out. Resignation soon settled across his face. "Yes. I yield," he choked out, each word causing the blade to slice deeper.

Finn abruptly released him, giving him a light shove to create some space. A few quick jerks of his fingers and his dagger slid back into its sheath. With a glance at the mass of ice that now coated the field, Finn made another gesture. His other blade swiftly burned through the ice that held it trapped and then rocketed through the air to join its brother.

It was only then that Finn finally released his mana, letting out a soft breath as the burning energy evaporated. The loss of the fire mana always left him feeling... weaker, slower. No matter how many times he went through the process, it was almost painful to let go of the tantalizing energy.

Without the mixture of adrenaline and mana coursing through his veins, Finn was finally able to focus on the hushed murmurs that drifted

across the field and down from the balconies that ringed the courtyard. Other mages lined the arena, watching the duel. After the competition, he had hoped his reputation would fade – at least slightly. Almost two days in-game had already passed since he was declared the guild's champion, but the crowd hadn't waned.

If anything, it had only grown larger.

Finn grimaced as he followed the gaze of the spectators to where his opponents lay broken and bleeding on the sand. The man he had left standing hurried over to the whimpering air mage, who still pawed uselessly at his face. Finn had found that leaving his training partners alive garnered some goodwill from the other novices. The wounds would heal, and it was better than losing nearly an hour to the deathscape. Plus, it prevented the faculty from shutting down these informal duels.

But it didn't make his actions any less brutal. Perhaps he'd gone too far... again.

The question was, why?

Even as that thought crossed his mind, Finn tamped down on it, struggling to forget – to think of something else, anything else. Yet it was hopeless. The image of flaming eyes set overtop purple silks returned, and the Seer's whispered bargain sliced through his mind like a burning blade.

Rachael

Finn swallowed hard, forcing aside the memories and emotions that threatened to surface. Instead, he leaned into the simmering, impatient anger that always came next. He was anxious to start the next leg of the Emir's competition and complete his end of the Seer's bargain... but he had been told to *wait*.

Finn had never been much good at that. Sitting, waiting, hesitating, pacing, and stewing – when every fiber of his being wanted to surge forward at a breakneck pace. Only the fighting had kept him sane. In the rush of

battle, he had no room for anything else. Yet now that moment was gone, and he was once again left with his own thoughts.

A slow clap echoed through the air, and Finn glanced up to see Abbad approaching, the austere librarian's eyes watching him carefully. "An impressive display."

"Why do I feel like you're mocking me?" Finn retorted, not able to entirely remove the bitterness from his voice.

"I offer no judgment. You seem to be far harder on yourself than I could ever be." The librarian's gaze skimmed to the other mages waiting along the edge of the field, checking their equipment as they prepared to pit themselves against Finn. "This is what? Your fifteenth bout this morning?"

Finn just shook his head. He had no idea. He had lost count some time ago. "I take it you've been watching me for a while then?" He hadn't seen the librarian arrive, but that was no surprise with the way the man could summon a curtain of reflective air.

"Only a moment," Abbad replied. "I've actually come to collect you. Although, I'm certain your would-be competitors and fans will sorely miss you."

Finn glanced up sharply, and he could feel his mana flare in his veins like the pop and crackle of a campfire. "Is it time?" He had been waiting for this moment ever since he had been crowned champion.

Abbad nodded. "Indeed, the Emir has summoned the three champions to explain your next steps." A moment's hesitation. "Although, there is something I would like for you to see first – assuming you are able to remain patient just a bit longer."

"Is that a request or an order?" Finn asked, meeting the librarian's eyes.

"A bit of both, perhaps? We serve at the Headmaster's discretion."

Finn chewed at the inside of his cheek. He wondered what this could be about. Perhaps Lamia's disappearance? Although, no one had seemed to notice that the water mage master had mysteriously vanished. Another instructor had simply shown up in her place, and things had continued as

normal – or *normal* for the Mage Guild anyway. There had been little love lost between Lamia and the students, so maybe no one cared? Finn supposed he was lucky that someone so reviled had chosen to ambush him.

Either way, there was no sense raising the issue unless Abbad did first.

Finn's eyes skimmed to the corner of the courtyard where a faint shadow lingered beneath the first-floor terrace. He knew Julia stood there, watching and waiting. His fingers shifted slightly – a short message in a simple code they had developed during the many attempts on his life. Then he turned back to Abbad.

“Well, you know me, I’m never one to ignore an order from Nefreet,” Finn said finally, his voice tinged with sarcasm.

Abbad arched a lone eyebrow. “Indeed.” He gestured toward the edge of the field. “Then come along. We have no time to waste.”

Chapter 2 - Corrupted

Abbad led Finn out of the guild's inner courtyard, heading directly north. They soon entered the abandoned section of the Mage Guild, passing through ruined rooms filled with ancient and decaying crafting equipment. Lonely furnaces, broken tables, and a thick coating of dust were all that filled these halls, and the dull thump of their footsteps was the only noise that broke the heavy silence.

Finn eyed the shadows cautiously. It wasn't that long ago that these abandoned hallways and rooms were a deathtrap for the unwary – a place where players assassinated their rivals to prevent them from participating in the Duels. Although, the students had little incentive to attack him now, and Abbad's presence would likely discourage anyone foolish enough to hold a grudge.

Finn spared the librarian a glance, raising an inquiring eyebrow. "Are you going to give me a hint as to where we're going? The anticipation is killing me."

Abbad snorted softly in reply but didn't offer an explanation.

Glad to see some things never change, Finn thought sarcastically.

A faint breeze drifted through the room, and the librarian's eyes darted to a nearby corner. A knife suddenly raced through the air behind Abbad – the only warning a soft hum. Abbad barely moved. He simply shifted his weight to his right foot on his next step, allowing the blade to pass by him by a mere inch. Even more impressive, he caught the knife neatly as it passed, trapping it with ribbons of air that glowed with a faint yellow light.

"Hello to you too, Thief," Abbad said calmly. His eyes were ablaze with azure light as they focused on a small spot of darkness. Only a moment later, Julia materialized from the shadows as she dropped from *Sneak*.

"First off, I'm not a thief – we've been over that," Finn's daughter snapped as she approached. She snatched her blade from the air, glancing at

it to make sure Abbad hadn't damaged her weapon. "Second, I almost got you that time. You're getting sloppy."

The librarian was unperturbed by Julia's goading, meeting her eyes evenly. "That is rather presumptuous. I'll remind you that you have yet to actually hit me. The far more likely answer is that I wished to goad you into a false sense of security."

Julia's eyes flashed. "Or maybe I've been doing the same thing."

"On the contrary, I'm confident I've already ascertained the extent of your abilities."

Julia huffed, crossing her arms as she glared at him. "Well, it's good to see that scroll is still firmly lodged up your—"

"Anyway," Finn interjected. "You were going to explain where we're going?" Julia arched an eyebrow at him, picking up on his blatant attempt to change the subject. Finn just shot her a look that said, "*Behave!*"

"Hmph," Abbad replied. He remained silent for a long moment as they stepped quickly through a series of dilapidated rooms. "As you know, the guild was long ago forced to abandon the art of crafting. This decision was made at the order of the Emir – the goal being to further weaken and suppress the mages within the city."

Finn nodded. That was consistent with what Brutus had told him.

Abbad glanced at the pair. "However, our craft was not lost. Instead, it was traded away to the Merchant Guild – who eventually evolved from simple tradesmen to something akin to magical mechanics."

Julia shook her head. "Wait, what? How is that possible? I thought mages were forced to train here in the Mage Guild."

Abbad cocked his head. "Your response assumes that crafting requires knowledge in the art of spellcasting – which is not always necessary." He shrugged. "Even for those creations that do require a more experienced mage, the Merchant Guild can certainly trade for those services or for the mages themselves."

"Uh, what do you mean by *trading for mages*?" Finn asked, sharing a confused look with Julia.