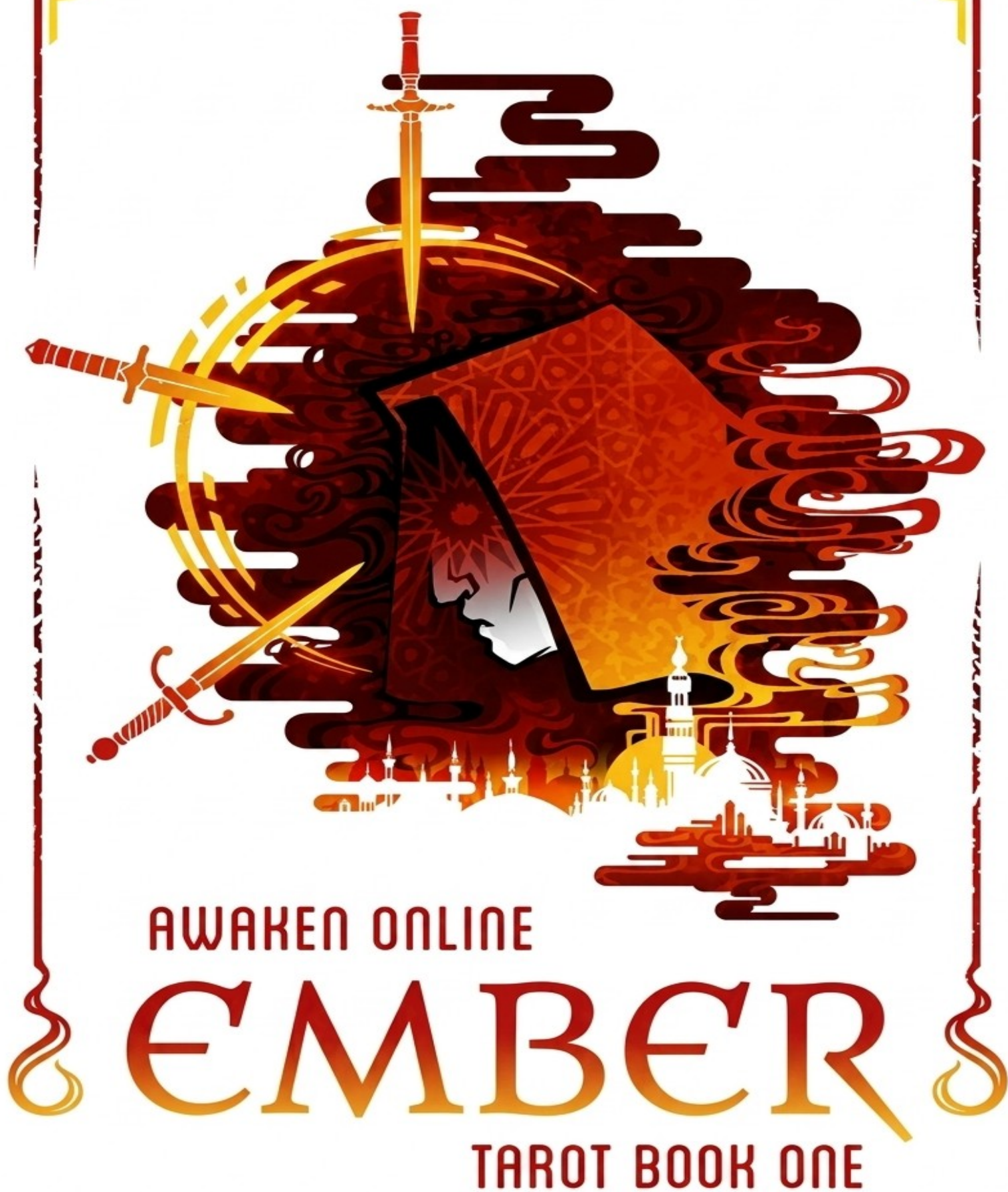


TRAVIS BAGWELL



Awaken Online

Tarot Book 1: Ember

Travis Bagwell

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To my wife... For the last time, I swear I didn't kill you off in this book and then search and replace your name.

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Prologue

Finn Harris looked out the window, watching as the other vehicles and buildings sped past. The sun had long since set, and the passing structures were merely a blur of colored lights. Faint technicolor streaks amid the darkness that vanished almost as quickly as they appeared. He could feel the gentle hum of the car's engine below them, but the shocks and soundproofing dampened most of the road noise.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Rachael asked, snuggling up beside him and draping his arm across her shoulders. He could feel the smooth fabric of her dress, a fanciful affair perfect for the award ceremony they had just left.

Finn grimaced, his eyes still on the window. He couldn't fight the heavy feeling that lingered in the pit of his stomach. It wasn't tangible. There wasn't any reason for it.

Something just felt off.

He felt Rachael tickle his ribs, and he let out a very manly yelp. Mock glaring at his wife, he said, "Behave. At my age, I'm likely to break a hip or something."

A tinkling laugh. "You aren't quite that old yet. There might still be a little fire left in you," she retorted, looking up at him.

The foreboding feeling receded slightly as he met her gaze. Glorious brown eyes framed by auburn-colored hair tinged with faint traces of gray. Rachael had never felt the need to color it. She was just who she was – without any shame or reservation. Even if they had long since crossed the half-century mark and had decades of married life behind them, she hadn't changed a bit. She was still the same captivating, gorgeous, rebellious woman he had married.

"And besides," she continued with a grin and a mischievous twinkle in her eye, "when you kick the bucket, I already have a young gentleman lined up and ready to go. I even have the French villa picked out. The life insurance should be just enough to cover it."

“Is that so?” Finn replied with a raised eyebrow. He rose to her challenge, cupping the back of her head and drawing her toward him. Rachael smiled as their lips met. He might not be twenty anymore, but he could still make a point.

When they withdrew a few minutes later, slightly breathless and flushed, there was a different sparkle in Rachael’s eye, one that Finn knew well. “So, is there a way to speed this thing up?” she asked. “I hear you might know a guy...”

Finn snorted softly. He could feel the sharp edge of his most recent award digging into his back. He had designed this vehicle. Well, at least the software that helped navigate both their autonomous car and the many others that surrounded them. These new vehicles were revolutionary. They were much more efficient, allowing for travel in a fraction of the time of their conventional counterparts. They removed the need for separate lanes, traffic lights, and stop signs. Once his company helped repurpose the ancient interstate highway system and this technology spread, people would be able to travel well past the previous speed limits, rivaling even train and air travel.

The mechanical hurdles had been tricky, but the linchpin was the new software controller. Finn liked to think of the new traffic system as water flowing through a pipe, except his software allowed them to track every molecule in real-time. Cars wove into traffic without pause. The AI controller he had designed allowed for incredibly small variances in the distance between vehicles, and it was able to dynamically adjust the velocity of an entire chain of cars – all while making split-second judgment calls. The AI was supposed to be safer since the software never got tired or distracted. There was still the risk of mechanical defects, of course, but the *software* was sound.

They had even given him an award for the achievement.

Well, technically, several awards.

“You know it doesn’t work that way. I can’t just hit the gas on *this* car,” Finn replied, looking down at his wife, his expression somber. The

same ominous feeling had returned when she mentioned the vehicle.

“It was just a joke,” Rachael replied, looking at him with a confused glance. “What’s up with you tonight? You seem like you are a million miles away and you’ve had this perpetual frown on your face, even while you were accepting your award.”

“And here I thought I was doing a good job of hiding it,” Finn muttered.

“Nope. Terrible. Stick to computers because acting definitely isn’t your strong suit.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Finn replied with a half-hearted chuckle. He shook his head. “Honestly, I don’t know what it is. I just have a bad feeling...”

Rachael sighed, rolling her eyes. “I know you want to pull up the terminal and look. Just do it, and then we can get back to where we left off.”

Finn smiled ruefully. She knew him too well. He had been compulsively checking the system every few minutes since it had gone live a few days ago. Right now, there was just this small strip of highway between two cities – a test case for the larger rollout. However, plans were already in the works for rapid expansion into every major city center within the next five years. The introduction of a massive federal grant had accelerated what had initially been a simple test project into a full-blown renovation of the country’s transportation system within a matter of months.

He tapped at a hidden panel beneath his seat, and a part of the cabin wall shifted, opening to reveal a recessed display. The logo for Cerillion Logistics flashed across the screen, and the system requested login credentials. Finn tapped at the screen, and a moment later, a grid showing the stream of traffic appeared in front of him, data scrawling down the margin. He suddenly wished he was sitting in front of his real workstation instead of this tiny little display.

Everything *looked* okay. The system was maintaining proper distances between the vehicles, and he didn’t see any immediate issues – at least nothing nearby. He panned out and looked farther down the highway.

A juncture was approaching ahead of them, and they were only about a minute out at their current speed.

A frown tugged at Finn's lips. The system was reporting that everything was okay, cars merging and diverging seamlessly. However, the data seemed to be telling a slightly different story. A slight millisecond delay, here and there. But even that small variance shouldn't have been happening. He sensed a pattern in the data, but his mind couldn't quite piece it together.

"What's wrong?" Rachael asked, noting his frown.

Finn looked over at her, opening his mouth to speak.

That was when he felt the tremor. Just a small irregularity. Most people probably wouldn't have noticed it. But he shouldn't have felt anything.

He looked back at the screen, and his perspective shifted slightly. "Oh shit, it's..."

He never got to finish that sentence.

Several things happened at once. The tremor grew dramatically more violent, causing the vehicle to sway. Finn tried to throw himself over Rachael, even though he knew that it was pointless. Already his mind was doing some rough calculations – the car's velocity, mass, momentum, and the tensile strength of the steel cage that surrounded them. Then he factored in the other vehicles on the highway. The kinetic dampening foam installed in the walls hadn't been tested to withstand the numbers that were tumbling through his head.

The damage would be catastrophic.

"Finn," Rachael shouted, looking up at him, her eyes wide and panicked.

The world seemed to list sideways, like an angry giant had just thrown their car, sending it tumbling through the air. The muted screeching grind of metal on metal echoed through the chamber, and they were suddenly weightless. Yet Finn's only focus was Rachael, keeping hold of her even as her auburn locks floated around her face.

He saw the fear in her eyes.

In that moment, Finn knew despair. It was a primal thing that flashed through his brain. He wanted to fight, to run, to *fix* this. Yet he knew it was impossible. It was the inevitability of that moment that caused the panic to settle in his mind. He couldn't do anything. He was trapped. *They* were trapped.

Then they slammed into something, the force of the impact throwing him across the cabin and ripping Rachael away from him. Finn's back struck the wall with a muted crack, a blinding pain erupting along his spine.

They were suddenly weightless again. The top of the vehicle had been ripped off in a shower of sparks and a thunderous crack of noise, the system trying vainly to seal the opening with a thick pink foam. Yet it was moving slowly – far too slowly. Finn reached for Rachael, his fingers stretching through the air, almost touching hers.

She met his eyes one last time, her mouth moving, but he heard nothing.

He screamed then, straining with every fiber of his being.

It was futile. Rachael was sucked out of the opening and into the dark expanse on the other side.

Chapter 1 - Crippled

October 3, 2076: 2 days after the release of Awaken Online.

“No!” Finn screamed.

His heart was beating rapidly, his pulse pounding in his ears. It felt like he was drowning, a heavy weight settling on his chest. With great heaving breaths, he tried to suck in air. His arm was outstretched, his fingers twitching as he strained to save a ghost.

All at once, Finn realized he was sitting in his bed. In his home. There was no car. There was no accident. That had happened a long time ago. More than a decade now.

These facts settled in his mind, each one feeling like a heavy blow. In some ways, they were even more painful than his dream. They meant that it had been real. That he was alive, and his wife was...

His hand automatically reached for the familiar spot beside him. It was empty. Of course, it was empty. Yet that hadn't stopped him from making the same feeble gesture every time he had that dream.

“Fuck,” he muttered. He felt something wet trickle down his cheek and soon tasted salt on his lips.

A soft chime echoed through the air, and light slowly began to filter into the room. Windows lined the wall behind the bed. The thick metal shutters opened automatically with a faint hiss of hydraulics, letting the morning sunlight trickle through the bulletproof glass that lined the windows on the other side.

“Good morning, sir. Are you alright? The dream again?” a male voice spoke up, his voice thick with compassion. A translucent ball of sapphire light appeared beside the bed, projected from hidden cameras embedded in the walls.

Finn just rubbed at his face without responding.

There was little genuine sympathy in the AI's voice. He knew it was fake. He had programmed it, after all. It was an attempt to simulate emotion – it didn't actually *feel*. It was Pavlovian. Like a digital dog. It picked up on his behavior. The shout. His heartbeat and respiration recorded by the chips installed under his skin. The gesture toward the empty half of his bed. The AI knew that this combination of behaviors meant that it needed to act a certain way. But it didn't – it couldn't – *understand* his pain.

"Yes, Daniel," Finn croaked. He had named the AI. It had made things easier.

"Would you like a moment?" Daniel asked.

Another canned response. The AI was on-script this morning.

Finn shook his head. "No. I just need to get moving."

A soft chime in response and a chair wheeled into the room, gliding over toward the edge of the bed.

"Would you like any help, sir?" Daniel asked.

"I'm good," Finn grunted, as he did every morning. Someday he would have to accept the AI's assistance – when his body finally grew too old and feeble to do this on his own. But it damned sure wouldn't be today. He would live with the full weight of his mistakes for as long as he could.

Finn gripped his legs, feeling nothing as his fingers touched the bare skin. He forcefully shoved the dead limbs to the edge of the bed and then managed to maneuver himself into the chair with practiced movements. He knew the next steps. Wheel himself to the bathroom, brush his teeth, shower – that was always hard. Then the task of pulling on his clothes. The ritual was familiar. He even knew exactly how long it would take, plus or minus about 90 seconds.

Yet today, he paused, staring down at his legs.

This was the price he had paid. After the accident, the doctors had offered him several options. He could have regrown the damaged nerve-endings in his spine, replaced his legs with advanced robotics, connecting cold metal wires into what was left of his damaged nervous system, or a half-

dozen other possibilities he couldn't remember anymore. He had turned them all down. His wife hadn't had any of those options. So, he would live with this.

As a reminder.

"Sir?" Daniel asked, giving off a faint blue pulse as he spoke. Another canned response. He had been sitting still for too long. Even now, he could visualize the branching dialogue tree from here. He knew exactly what Daniel would say if he didn't start moving.

"I'm fine," Finn said again, as though saying it out loud would make it true.

He didn't sound very convincing, even to himself.

With a sigh, he began wheeling himself toward the bathroom. 1 hour and 37 minutes. That's how long it would take to get ready. Then he could start his day.

* * *

1 hour, 37 minutes, and 47 seconds later, Finn wheeled himself into the kitchen, palming the metal bars on the wheels. He refused to use the chair's electronics. He needed the exercise anyway. The old man that had stared back at him in the mirror had looked rather pale and thin, and it had been a struggle to lift himself in and out of the shower this morning.

The lights immediately came on, Daniel drifting into the room like some sort of overprotective blue angel. However, Finn was forced to do a double take. Something about his routine was off. There was the familiar tang of coffee in the air, but he could also smell food cooking on the stove.

He wheeled himself further into the room. Daniel had been busy. Piles of bacon and eggs were lined up on the counter. Mechanical arms stretched out of the backsplash – stirring and flipping as they prepared another batch of food on the stovetop.

"What is this, Daniel?" Finn asked. "You know I prefer to make my own breakfast."

“Sir, it is October 3rd,” Daniel replied.

“I know what day it is,” Finn snapped. “Why is that significant?”

“Your children are scheduled to arrive in the next five minutes...”

Daniel trailed off, the cloudy blue haze flashing.

“Correction, your son and his family have just pulled into the drive,” the AI reported. “Shall I disable the building’s security measures?”

Finn bit back a frustrated response. Daniel hadn’t given him a warning yesterday evening or this morning. He sensed his son’s – or more likely, his daughter’s – manipulations behind this. Although to be fair, he had rescheduled the breakfast about a dozen times now. Apparently, Gracen and Julia had decided to take matters into their own hands.

“Fine, let them in. Also, set a reminder for me to overhaul your user permissions,” Finn grumbled. He could immediately hear the muted grating sound of metal on metal as the AI released the reinforced shielding on the front door.

“Of course, sir. However, I have been instructed to inform you that your firewall also needs some work and that you are slipping in your old age,” Daniel replied. For a moment, Finn almost thought he detected amusement in the AI’s voice, but that couldn’t have been possible. Not unless he had put it there.

Damn it. Definitely Julia, he thought.

Sighing, Finn wheeled himself over to the kitchen table. Daniel was already transforming the surface, the tabletop expanding and chairs emerging from the floor to accommodate the crowd that would soon be disturbing his home. He closed his eyes, willing himself to stay calm. He needed to keep up the act today. He was fine. Just *fine*.

He didn’t have to wait long.

He heard the front door click open a few seconds later. It would take them approximately 60 seconds to walk from the front door to the kitchen. Even now, he could hear footsteps down the hallway.

“Hi, Dad,” Gracen said.

Finn opened his eyes to see his son looking at him, failing badly at hiding his concern. His wife stepped into the room behind him, their two young children in tow. Finn did his best to plaster a smile on his wrinkled lips.

“Hey there, sport,” he said, as his son stooped to give him a hug. “Sarah,” he said with a smile as he greeted his daughter-in-law.

“Wow, have you two gotten bigger!” Finn said, eyeing his grandchildren as he gave another round of hugs. Rachael would have loved to see them. She had always wanted grandkids. Just that brief thought caused the memory of his dream to return, and he had to bite back a grimace.

“Come on, gang. Get off Grandpa and let’s get you something to eat,” Sarah said, herding the kids over to the counter with an apologetic look at Finn.

She must have misinterpreted Finn’s reaction – assuming the kids had hurt him or something. Damn it. He needed to keep it together. He rounded on his son, looking for a distraction. “What did you do to Daniel?” he asked.

Gracen looked a little nervous, biting at his lip. Sarah glanced over at him in confusion, but her attention was quickly refocused on heaping some food onto the kids’ plates and finding them a place at the table. “Well, I just set an appointment for this morning,” Gracen offered tentatively.

“Uh-huh. With no reminders,” Finn continued dryly. “That seems a bit beyond your capabilities. I sense your sister’s hand in this. Where is she, by the way?”

“Julia should be here shortly,” Gracen replied cautiously. “She said she was caught in traffic.”

“Managed to find a shortcut!” Finn’s daughter said, poking her head into the room. Of course, Daniel hadn’t announced her presence. Finn couldn’t help but glare at the floating blue cloud that hovered in the corner of the room. The lack of reminders had been a minor annoyance, but this

was another matter entirely. Julia had somehow circumvented all of the security protocols built into Daniel's systems.

"Hey, Dad," Julia said, giving him a peck on the cheek.

She pulled away, noting the sour look on his face. "What's wrong? Aren't you happy to see me?" He saw her brown eyes flash mischievously. Yet he could only see Rachael in her face. It was the hair and the eyes that got him every time.

"You've been messing with Daniel's programming again, haven't you?" Finn grumbled. "And it sounds like you roped your brother into it this time."

"Didn't have a choice after you removed my remote access. Besides, I only made a few little tweaks here and there. Daniel needed a little more *personality*. Especially if he's your only companion in your self-imposed exile," Julia replied unapologetically, settling down into the chair beside him and kicking her feet up on the table.

Suddenly, Daniel's glib tone earlier made sense.

"I gave you two remote access to my network so that you could get in touch in case of an emergency," Finn reprimanded Julia. Although he was struggling to maintain his frustration. He was somewhat impressed. Even with a remote login, it would have been an undertaking to hack his system. Julia had gotten a lot better.

"Yeah, well, there was a *boring* emergency in here," she replied, arching an eyebrow.

"Here you go," Sarah said, depositing plates in front of the two and interrupting Finn's next barbed comment. The rest of the group had settled down around the table.

"So, what have you been up to lately?" Gracen asked his father, clearly trying to switch the subject. "Any cool projects or upgrades to the Fortress?" He asked this while gesturing at the house.

Finn grimaced, rubbing at his neck. "Nothing really. Just regular maintenance and a few upgrades around the *house*. Although, it sounds like I'm going to be spending some time running diagnostics on Daniel this

afternoon,” he added dryly, glancing at his daughter. He just received a grin in response.

“Huh. Well, one of your old colleagues at Cerillion contacted me the other day,” Gracen offered. “Said something about having trouble getting in touch with you. He thought he had something that you might be interested in.”

“I’m good,” Finn replied curtly. He had blocked most public network access for a reason.

“You don’t even know what it is. Besides, it could also be a good reason to get out of the house a little...” Gracen offered, trailing off as he saw his father’s expression.

“I’ve got more than enough to keep me busy,” Finn grumbled before shoving another forkful of food into his mouth.

His entire family looked at him skeptically. Even Sarah’s expression indicated that she thought he was full of shit. This was precisely why he avoided these gatherings! They just had to go and try and help him, fix him, force him to move on. Next, they would probably tell him it wasn’t his fault. Just a mechanical glitch. A bit of faulty wiring that had cascaded into a devastating accident.

But he couldn’t forgive himself. He just couldn’t.

After the accident, Finn had tried to stop the implementation of autonomous vehicles, but it was already too late. He had expected a public outcry, people screaming about the dangers of this new technology. However, he had vastly underestimated the power and influence that Cerillion Logistics’ parent company exercised.

The company had spun the story so hard that it had made Finn dizzy. They had pointed out how the accident actually demonstrated how much *safer* the cars were. Very few people had died in the collision due to the additional safety features that had been built into each vehicle. The system – his system – had managed to protect nearly everyone. Besides, they couldn’t prevent *all* accidents. And the system was still infinitely safer than manually operated vehicles.

For others, this had been a compelling argument, though the statistics rang hollow for Finn. His wife wasn't just a number on a page. His complaints and concerns had landed on deaf ears. The bean counters didn't want to hear about defects in a product that would make them billions.

He had turned to the government then, trying to stop the federal grant. Yet that had just been another dead end. He had been confronted by senators acting in lockstep. He'd received condolences and handshakes, but nothing more. A little bit of digging had revealed that the company was one of the largest political contributors in the country. No one in their right mind was going to speak out against them – it would have been political suicide.

In the face of this monstrous *thing* that he had created and its overwhelming momentum, he had been forced to give up. He was just one broken man who once again found himself along for the ride. The company had gently nudged him into early retirement, citing mental health issues. The younger executives looking for a rotation in the old guard had been more than happy to help speed that process along.

Disenchanted and disgusted with the world, Finn had sold his shares in the company, taken the golden parachute, and built this house – locking himself away behind several inches of reinforced steel and a nearly impenetrable firewall.

He was now a self-imposed hermit amid an ocean of people.

"I'm fine," Finn murmured, snapping back to attention. The others were all looking at him, concern lingering in their eyes.

"I'm not sure you even know what that word means anymore," Julia groused at him. She waved at the floating blue AI. "It's like talking to Daniel. You're saying the right words, but there's nothing behind it."

"Julia," her brother hissed. "Take it easy."

"Hey, it's the truth," she insisted. She glared at Gracen. "He's getting worse."

Finn didn't miss the way his son motioned at his wife to take the kids into the other room. Sarah spared Finn a sympathetic look as she left,

mouthed the words, "I'm sorry." He just wished she would take *him* with her.

Julia turned to face her father. He saw determination there. She knew she was right, and she wasn't going to back down. Damn it, as much as it pained him to admit it, Rachael would have been proud. "When was the last time you left this cyber fortress you've built for yourself?" his daughter demanded.

"Umm..." Finn honestly couldn't remember. Maybe a few months? Everything he needed was delivered, and Daniel took care of practically everything else. There wasn't really any reason to leave.

"The answer is a year," Julia said. "I checked while I was rooting around Daniel's operating system. How about the last time you talked to someone besides Daniel?"

Shit, he thought to himself. Why couldn't he have dropped these brats on their heads when they were younger? Two human vegetables hooked up to a ventilator would have been much easier to manage.

"Yeah, I thought so," Julia continued, taking his silence as an admission.

"This isn't how we talked about handling this," Gracen muttered.

"So, there was a plan behind this ambush and tirade?" Finn asked sourly. "Was this supposed to be an intervention or something?"

"Definitely *or something*," his son grumbled under his breath.

"Yeah, actually. That's exactly what it is. An intervention," Julia said, glaring at her brother. "And we also brought your stubborn, ungrateful ass a present. Let me just go grab it. I left it by the door." She hopped out of her chair and headed for the front entryway.

"Hey, I'm sorry about this," Gracen said to Finn as his sister left the room. "Honestly, I didn't think she was going to be so harsh."

Finn could only laugh at that. "You didn't expect your sister to speak her mind – bluntly and without reservation? Maybe I'm not the one that's out of touch." This earned him a small smile from Gracen.