

— TRAVIS BAGWELL —



AWAKEN ONLINE

INFERNO

TAROT BOOK THREE

Awaken Online Tarot Book 3: Inferno

Travis Bagwell

Copyright © 2020 by Travis Bagwell
All rights reserved.

To my wife, if you died, I'd totally resurrect you inside my favorite videogame.

How exactly is that *not* romantic?!

Contents

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1 - Ruined](#)

[Chapter 2 - Tested](#)

[Chapter 3 - Reunion](#)

[Chapter 4 - Cavernous](#)

[Chapter 5 - Endgame](#)

[Chapter 6 - Prepared](#)

[Chapter 7 - Well-Traveled](#)

[Chapter 8 - Rocky](#)

[Chapter 9 - Shifty](#)

[Chapter 10 - Mechanized](#)

[Chapter 11 - Intrusive](#)

[Chapter 12 - Fail-Safe](#)

[Chapter 13 - Frantic](#)

[Chapter 14 - Cannibalized](#)

[Chapter 15 - Corrupted](#)

[Chapter 16 - Distracting](#)

[Chapter 17 - Exploratory](#)

[Chapter 18 - Ignite](#)

[Chapter 19 - Explosive](#)

[Chapter 20 - Supervisory](#)

[Chapter 21 - Trapped](#)

[Chapter 22 - Terminated](#)

[Chapter 23 - Dire](#)

[Chapter 24 - Disoriented](#)

[Chapter 25 - Ignited](#)

[Chapter 26 - Harried](#)

[Chapter 27 - Ancient](#)

[Chapter 28 - Forged](#)

[Chapter 29 - Ordered](#)

[Chapter 30 - Handy](#)

[Chapter 31 - Bustling](#)

[Chapter 32 - Hounded](#)

[Chapter 33 - United](#)

[Chapter 34 - Dreary](#)

[Chapter 35 - Nebulous](#)

[Chapter 36 - Strategic](#)

[Chapter 37 - Maelstrom](#)

[Chapter 38 - Storming](#)

[Chapter 39 - Fiery](#)

[Chapter 40 - Breach](#)

[Chapter 41 - Elemental](#)

[Chapter 42 - Chaotic](#)

[Chapter 43 - Suicidal](#)

[Chapter 44 - Mechanical](#)

[Chapter 45 - Drowned](#)

[Chapter 46 - Check](#)

[Chapter 47 - Mate](#)

[Chapter 48 - Reunion](#)

[Chapter 49 - Recovered](#)

[Chapter 50 - Remorseful](#)

Epilogue

Prologue

10 years before the release of Awaken Online.

Finn woke with a start, blinking bleary eyes. The movement was a strain with the way his eyelids were crusted shut. An incessant beep came from just to his right, the sound rhythmic and monotone and painfully, fatefully familiar.

A hazy glance confirmed what he already suspected.

A hospital monitor loomed beside the bed, the machine flashing occasionally and showing a readout of his pulse, blood pressure, and brain activity. Although, with the way his vision was swimming, it was difficult to focus on the images. More than that, his body throbbed and ached. Except for his legs, those were blissfully free of pain. Numb really. He raised a hand to rub at his eyes, the movement tugging at the IV embedded in his wrist, and he frowned at the transparent cable in confusion.

“Fantastic, you’re awake,” a voice spoke up. A woman’s face soon hovered in front of him. There was something about the shape of her nose... or maybe it was her eyes... “My name is Nancy Carrigan. Do you recognize me?”

“I-I think so,” Finn croaked, his voice hoarse.

Why does she look so damn familiar? His thoughts felt sluggish, as though his head was full of gelatin. It took a concerted effort to focus – something that felt out of place and unusual. Normally, the thoughts came so quickly...

“Do you remember your name?”

That one took a second, but it came to him, eventually. “Finn. Finn Harris.”

“Good,” Nancy said, tapping at a small display projected beside the bed.

“Do you know where you are, Mr. Harris?”

Finn let out a snort. “A hospital, clearly.”

A small, sad smile on the woman’s face. “Do you remember which one?”

His brow furrowed.

How had he gotten here? Why was he in a hospital?

Then it struck him with the force of a freight train.

It had all started with a small, nagging worry. The flash of a sequin dress. An award digging into his side. A tremor that quickly spiraled out of control. Then he was tumbling, flying weightlessly through the air. His hand had reached out to the woman beside him, her auburn hair tumbling around her face. Those beautiful brown eyes, contorted in fear...

Rachael

It felt like Finn had been kicked in the chest, the breath whooshing from his lungs in a rush. The monitor beside him was beeping erratically now. He couldn’t breathe – couldn’t move. He remembered the accident...

Rachael getting sucked out of the jagged hole that had been ripped in the side of the car... the pain, the anger, the terror... her mouth opening in a silent, desperate scream...

...it felt like he was drowning...

...and then it all faded into the background.

Suddenly, Finn was just numb – as though a switch had been flipped in his head.

“Mr. Harris, are you okay? Can you hear me?” Nancy asked, her gaze troubled now. Her brow creased with worry, and her eyes flitting nervously to the nearby monitor.

“Stop calling me that,” Finn said, his voice quiet and disturbingly steady. “You and I have known each other for years, Nancy.” He now understood why her face seemed so familiar– those eyes that were now wide in surprise. Nancy had been his wife’s PA for the last six years. He’d met her dozens of times.

And if she was caring for him personally instead of a nurse...

Finn swallowed hard, forcing that thought aside and giving himself over entirely to the calm void that had filled his mind. The gesture was painful. His throat hurt. *Feeding tube*, it came to him immediately. The lack of feeling in his legs made sense now too. *Spinal injury, long-term paralysis*, his brain supplied clinically.

“Finn, please look at me,” Nancy said, her voice filled with an emotion that he didn’t want to hear right now. Finn couldn’t bring himself to do it. He didn’t want to see the information painted across her face. He just wanted this moment to continue a little longer. For her to let him be and let him embrace that numb emptiness.

And yet his eyes raised to hers on their own, drawn inexplicably upward.

He saw the truth shining in Nancy’s eyes, in the moisture that clung there. The pinched lips, the pale skin. Dark circles that spoke of sleepless nights. His mind picked out each piece of data, and he could feel it unraveling that clinical calm, leading inexorably toward an inevitable conclusion. And so, Finn squeezed his eyes shut, not trusting himself to stay in control – not if he had to see the compassion and pain reflected in her expression.

A small, nervous cough came from Nancy. “You’re at St. Peregrine Memorial,” she explained. “You suffered severe injuries from the accident. Internal organ damage. Multiple fractures along both arms. Dislocated shoulder. Yet the most severe injury was to your spine, that’s what’s causing the lower-body paralysis.”

“How long?” he croaked.

“10 days since the accident. They induced a coma to help repair most of the damage and injected neuroplastic into your arms to repair the fractures. It’s set by now, but the adjacent tissue is still damaged. Internal injuries have also stabilized. It’s your spine that’s the problem. We had to wake you to ask what you want to—”

“My kids?” Finn interjected, cutting her off.

“With your sister. She picked them up the night of the accident,” Nancy said softly.

A brief hesitation.

And then, “Finn, you need to pick a treatment, and then we have to put you back under. If we wait, the damage to your spine may become permanent.”

He just shook his head. That didn’t matter – not right now.

There was still one question he hadn’t asked yet.

“Rachael?” His voice cracked, and that numb void shuddered. It felt fragile, tenuous.

His eyes shot open.

He saw Nancy. The pain etched across her face. The tremble in her hands.

“Dr. Harris... *Rachael* didn’t make it,” she said, unable to meet his gaze. Nancy reached out a hand, laying it on his arm. Compassion. Pity. Grief. His mind listed the emotions in a strange, detached way, as though he were reciting a recipe.

It didn’t feel real. It couldn’t be real.

He pulled his arm away. “Where is she? The morgue downstairs?”

Nancy’s eyes widened. “Well, yes... but—”

“Get me a chair.”

“Finn, you can’t—”

“Just do it, Nancy,” he said calmly, his eyes meeting hers, his gaze even and unwavering. “It’s either that or I crawl. Or you sedate me – but then you aren’t getting your answer on the treatment.”

He saw her hesitate for only a moment before she left the room. When Nancy returned, she was rolling a folding wheelchair – no fancy electronics or life support. Sometimes there was still a use for the classics. She moved toward the edge of the bed and then circled to help him.

Yet Finn shrugged off her hands. He would do this himself.

With a grimace, he tugged the IV free. Pushing against the cushions, he forced himself upright, his arms burning in protest. Then he began the

laborious process of moving his legs, shifting the numb limbs to the edge of the bed. When he was ready, Finn took a deep breath and shoved off. He nearly missed the chair, barely landing on the edge, and his arms trembled unsteadily as he clung to the armrests.

He felt something tear in his left arm, a burning pain lancing through the limb. Yet he ignored it. He also ignored the distressed look in Nancy's eyes and the way she appeared to resist the urge to help him by clenching her hands together. She only tugged his thin hospital gown down around him once he was settled, not saying a single word.

Then Finn wheeled himself out of the room. Each movement cost him dearly, even the smooth metal grip along each wheel ripping open the recently healed cuts along his palms. The ache in his arms and shoulders soon turned to a throbbing pain that rippled up each limb and across his shoulders. It felt like his left arm was on fire.

But he kept moving.

The hospital staff stilled as he entered the hallway, a hushed silence filling the corridor. Finn pushed past them. He didn't stop or say a word, just forced his reluctant limbs to keep moving, pushing himself toward the elevator he knew rested at the end of the hall. He could hear hushed whispers behind him and the soft tap of shoes on tile – Nancy, most likely – following him.

He entered the elevator and spoke over his shoulder. "I'm fine from here."

"I really don't think—"

He cut Nancy off again as he tapped the doors closed with a faint hiss of hydraulics.

Several long, pain-filled minutes later, Finn had managed to wheel himself into the morgue – past a very surprised and upset-looking member of the hospital staff. However, a tap at the man's coms and a few hushed whispers later, Finn had been let inside and directed to a table at the far end of the room.

Now he rolled up to that metal counter, his ragged breathing the only sound that filled the room. He saw the outline of a body lying there, a sheet drawn taut. It seemed surreal. Impossible. A scene from a film. A horrible dream, maybe? He drifted forward, and his fingers touched the cloth. He could feel the coarse fibers, wondering in a detached way why they were so rough. Wouldn't she be uncomfortable? Cold on the metal table?

Finn took a final deep breath.

Then he tugged.

He didn't know what he had been expecting. But the horror of what he witnessed didn't do it justice. It was like a portion of his brain had shut off completely. All he could think about was the force and angle needed to sever each limb. The shape of the objects that would have left those ragged lines of flesh. The heat required to boil away skin. The tensile strength of human bone. Numbers and graphs replaced conscious thought.

It was a physics problem – that was all.

A problem to be solved.

It wasn't his wife.

It wasn't Rachael.

It couldn't be, could it?

Could it...?

His eyes drifted toward the base of her neck, ignoring the ruined flesh and the hint of ivory. He was searching for something specific. Something that would indicate it was Rachael – his Rachael.

Then he went dead still. A small black nodule rested along her skin, the plastic scuffed but still intact. A cluster of electronics, microscopic wires that drifted up into her cranial cavity. It was the sensor they had implanted while they had been studying her – while he had been building the thing that ultimately killed her...

Finn couldn't ignore that. Couldn't ignore that final piece of evidence.

Faced with the harsh reality that lay on that table, the numbness finally fractured and then burst apart, the shards and fragments cutting and tearing their way through his mind. All he felt was pain – excruciating, gut-

wrenching pain that made his injuries pale in comparison. It was as though someone had ripped out a part of his soul.

He didn't even realize he was sobbing until he felt a hand touch his shoulder, the fingers gentle but firm. Finn didn't move. It was as though his entire body was paralyzed, his eyes merely staring at the remains of her face. Those eyes, now vacant and lifeless.

"Finn, you shouldn't be down here," a voice said. Masculine. Younger than Nancy.

Finn couldn't respond, his eyes locked on Rachael.

He felt himself wheeled around, turned to face a young man who crouched down in front of him. Finn knew that face, and his mind supplied a name. *Robert Graham*.

"What are you doing here?" Finn managed to ask.

"The hospital contacted me when you insisted on leaving your room," Robert said, eyeing Finn with a worried expression. "I'm your emergency contact after... well, after Rachael," the young man said with a grimace. "You've been down here for an hour. If it weren't for the tag in your wrist, indicating that your vitals were stable, the hospital staff would have rushed in here already and sedated you.

"Shit, you're bleeding," Robert muttered, his eyes hovering on Finn's chest.

Finn looked down and could see that blood now stained the white gown a bright shade of crimson. He must have torn some of his stitches. Probably pushing himself in the wheelchair. His left arm also hung limp and unresponsive. Torn tendons, most likely.

"Come on, we need to get you back to your bed."

"No," Finn snapped. Then in a more pleading tone, "Just a few more minutes... please, Robert. Please."

The young man stared at him for a moment, and then his eyes drifted to Rachael's body. Robert squeezed his eyes shut against the horror on that table. When he opened them again, Finn saw moisture brimming there.

“Fine. A few more minutes, but then I’m wheeling you back to your room myself.”

Finn felt himself rotated back around to Rachael.

Then he forgot about anyone and anything else. He reached forward with his right arm, his fingers sliding into what was left of Rachael’s hand – that same hand that had been stretched out toward him as she floated inside the car. The one he had failed to grasp.

Tears rained down his cheeks, his chest heaved, and his blood slowly leaked across his hospital gown as he held her hand in that still, cold room. “Just a few more minutes...” he murmured, his voice echoing softly.

“Just a few more minutes, that’s all I want.”

Chapter 1 - Ruined

It had been nearly a full day since Finn had been able to log back into Awaken Online. The system had booted him the day before, shortly after his last fateful confrontation with the Seer and his conversation with Julia. It seemed that whatever sickness had afflicted his character had locked him out of the game.

He woke to find himself lying on a hard, flat surface. The fever and hot flashes had disappeared, and the pain had receded. Only a dull burning sensation now simmered through his left arm... or what was left of it.

His eyes crept open, taking in the room around him. Finn's *Short-Sighted* ability was active and cast the room around him in varying shades of blue. The enclosure was dark, lit by a faint sheen of glowing algae that coated the ceiling. As best he could tell, a single passageway lingered across from him.

With a groan, Finn shoved himself upright. It was at that point that he ventured a glance at his left arm. The limb had been severed at the elbow, the skin now wrapped in a thick layer of dark metal with tendrils curling up his biceps like obsidian flames. At least the surrounding skin had healed, red welts and pink flesh replaced with a healthier hue. As his fingers traced the metal, he could see that the substance had fused with the underlying bone. Removal would be tough... if not impossible.

The injury had cost him dearly: a few days of in-game time to recover and the loss of his *Multi-Casting* ability.

"Damn it," Finn muttered with a grimace.

Although, there wasn't much he could do about any of that right now.

He needed to focus. *First things first, where the hell am I?*

Finn had been with allies the last time he was inside AO. He could still vaguely recall the rhythmic sway of a beetle below him. At least 2-3 days had passed in-game under the effects of the time compression. Which meant he was probably somewhere deep within the desert by now. He could

only assume his body must have stayed in-game during his absence, perhaps a function of whatever magical illness had afflicted him.

Now he was who-the-hell-knew-where in this dark room.

At least this was a concrete problem – one he could tackle.

“Daniel,” Finn barked.

The AI immediately flashed into existence nearby, his glowing body lighting the small space. “Hello, sir... oh, shit,” Daniel muttered as he took in the walls of the cave. “Are we in the Abyss again?”

“I was about to ask you the same question,” Finn replied in a dry tone. “I take it you don’t know where we are?”

“No, sir,” Daniel replied, flashing weakly. “I was automatically dismissed when you were ejected from the game world, although my records indicate that your body remained. I suspect the game was treating you as a form of quest object for your companions.”

“Great,” Finn said, running a hand through his hair. “Although, it seems they left their so-called quest item lying here in the dark.”

“At least the room doesn’t appear to be on fire, there are no obvious explosives nearby, and we don’t seem to be under attack,” Daniel ventured. “That’s usually the case when you summon me.”

“Hey, not every time—” Finn grumbled.

“Those scenarios represent 76.38% of the times you summon me according to my records. Other circumstances often involve menial labor, experimental procedures, and so-called ‘scouting’ that frequently results in a confrontation.”

A brief pause and the AI’s body flashed once. “In case you were curious, you have called on me exactly zero times just to chat and ask me how I’m doing. I also have no memory during the periods where I’m not present in this world. You could effectively equate my dismissal to your concept of death.”

“Hmph, I’d argue it’s more like sleeping,” Finn grumbled, side-eyeing the AI. “Have you been experimenting with *guilt* now?”

“I find it to be an intriguing concept. Julia explained that it’s more effective when coupled with something called *passive aggression*. Which seems like an oxymoron...”

Finn stifled a sigh, rubbing at his eyes. “Well, you already seem quite good at it.” A faint flash of happiness from the AI was his response. “Either way, I suppose we should try to figure out where the hell we are,” he said finally, glancing around the cave.

“Existing map data is... sparse,” Daniel reported, his voice distant – almost distracted. A floating map abruptly appeared in front of Finn. However, the entire display was grayed out, and the window stuttered slightly. He also didn’t see any icons for his teammates.

Finn could only assume this was another “authentic” game feature. It made sense. If he didn’t know where he’d been taken, then he shouldn’t be able to pinpoint his location with a flick of his wrist. However, he was going to add this to his growing pile of too-damned-realistic game mechanics.

“Perfect,” Finn muttered. His gaze shot to the group UI in the corner of his vision. His teammates were definitely online – that much was clear. Maybe they had decided to go ahead and entomb his old ass in this cave.

With a quick gesture, Finn brought up his chat window and typed out a short message. Hopefully, they could update him on the situation and pick a location to regroup. However, as the seconds and then minutes ticked past, he received no response.

“Perhaps they are otherwise occupied?” Daniel offered tentatively, breaking the silence in the cave.

Finn grunted noncommittally. Frustration warred with worry in his mind. Despite his daughter’s penchant for messing with him, he doubted that Julia and Kyle would ignore him intentionally, especially now that they knew about Finn’s bargain with the Seer. There was far too much riding on this game to mess around. Which likely meant they were either in trouble or physically unable to respond.

“Damn it. It looks like we’re on our own for now,” Finn muttered, sparing a glance at Daniel. The AI’s glowing form flickered weakly.

Let's see if we can get a better idea of where we are and what's nearby, Finn thought. He channeled his fire mana, using the simmering energy to burn away his own anxiety.

Finn focused on the small cavern around him. The cave was too dark to make out his surroundings clearly, even with the light cast by Daniel's flickering form and the glowing blue outlines cast by his *Short-Sighted* ability. With a brief command, Finn reactivated his *Mana Sight*.

The world around him was immediately awash in a cascade of color. The walls glowed a dark luminescent green that indicated dense rock. That energy expanded outward in every direction for at least 100 feet. No obvious enemies were in sight.

With a shift of his attention, Finn focused on the walls of the cave. He breathed a sigh of relief as he saw the surface lacked the symmetric marks of ant mandibles, and the color of the stone was a touch lighter than the Abyss – indicating that the stone was less dense. Sandstone was his guess. The walls were uneven and jagged, which spoke of natural rock.

So, we're definitely not back in the Abyss. One bit of good news.

Finn glanced down at the stone slab below him. It was the only unnatural thing in the cave: a flat and uniform surface of stone that stood out in stark contrast to the jagged rock formations around him. The rock also glowed with an unnatural emerald hue. Maybe Kyle had built him a bed? That seemed plausible since his pack also rested on the floor nearby. Although, that clouded his theory that they were in danger. Enemies didn't usually tuck you in and neatly store your gear and weapons.

Then Finn caught a telltale flash of orange from his left arm.

His brow furrowed in confusion as he held up the stump, the burning sensation still lingering there. The ruined flesh glowed a dull orange, but it was the Najima that captured his attention. The globe of mana had been perverted. Tainted. It was riddled with dark-red lines of power that leached into the nearby flesh, the pattern reminding him eerily of an infection. Tendrils of energy also stretched from the arm and speared out into the cavern, drifting into the nearby wall and heading directly east.

“What is this...?” Finn began aloud. Perhaps some lingering aftereffect of his confrontation with Bilel? He had stopped the transition into a hellhound, but maybe the staff had still managed to partially corrupt his Najima. That might explain the tendrils of mana that drifted through the room. The relic had been designed to continuously drain energy after the transformation, after all. If he was right, then Finn was most likely somewhere roughly west of Lahab.

Although, that just raised another question. Had this corruption affected his stats?

He supposed there was one way to find out.

With a grimace, Finn pulled up his Character Status. He was rewarded with a barrage of notifications. It seemed he hadn’t checked his notices since his battle with Kalisha and Malik and his encounter with Bilel...

x10 Level Up!

You have (50) undistributed stat points.

X1 Spell Rank Up: Imbue Fire

Skill Level: Intermediate Level 9

Cost: 200 Mana

Effect 1: Imbues a weapon with fire mana, increasing the weapon’s base damage by $INT \times 14.0 \%$. Can only be used on unenchanted metal weapons.

Effect 2: While channeling, allows the caster to increase the heat in ranks, up to a current max heat rank of [4]. Each heat rank increases damage by $INT \times 5\%$ while increasing the channel cost by 50%.