

# INVADING HELL

# **THE OCULUS GATE SERIES**

**BOOK ONE: HEAVEN CAME DOWN**

**BOOK TWO: INVADING HELL**

# **INVADING HELL**

**BOOK TWO IN THE OCLUS GATE SERIES**

**BY**

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Invading Hell

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## Chapter One

Trudy aimed her flamethrower at the metal door. The barrel nearly touched a warning sign emblazoned on the front—Angel Hive: Authorized Personnel Only.

“Jack,” she shouted. “Found it. Basement. Northeast corner.”

Jack’s voice filtered through her earbud. “I’m thirty seconds away, Sis. Don’t burn the place down without me.”

“No promises. If you want in on the party, you need to get here on time.” She adjusted the fuel tanks on her back and gazed down the empty hallway. As expected, her call aroused no guards. Angel headquarters appeared to be abandoned, no dangers in sight. Yet, with so many valuables lying hidden within these walls, who could tell if a door might lead to a trap?

Loud footsteps thumped on the carpeted floor. Jack’s athletic form appeared as he jogged around a corner, a flamethrower gripped in both hands and his own tanks strapped over his camo uniform. When he arrived, he pushed his hair back, his dark curls dampened by sweat.

Trudy punched his arm. “Tough day at the gym?”

“I was on the top floor, and these tanks weigh a ton.”

“Cry me a river, muscle man.” She adjusted her earbud. “Kat? Did you hear? I found the hive room.”

“Got your position,” Kat said through the bud. “I’ll unlock it.”

A click sounded from the door.

Jack offered a tight-lipped nod. “Having the angel queen’s face and fingerprints is like the ultimate skeleton key.”

Trudy smirked. “She’ll milk that advantage all day long.”

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“That should do it,” Kat said. “It looks like the hive room has a separate computer control system, not accessible remotely. Be careful.”

“Will do.” Trudy touched the door’s latch. “Leo? Iona? How goes the city flyover?”

Iona’s voice punched through. “Already done and on our way to HQ. The thermal sensors say plenty of warm bodies are in the temple, so it won’t be an easy nut to crack. We’ll be there to pick you guys up in a little while.”

“Thanks.” Trudy looked at Jack as he drummed his fingers on his flamethrower, his angular face tense, obviously anxious to charge into the hive room. But he could wait another minute. “Kat, what’s your status?”

“Ben and I are in the computer vault downloading the angel databases. I used the data key I already had and found where the other key is hidden, locked in a bank in the city. When the download’s done, we’ll meet you out front.”

“Sounds good. Keep an ear to your buds. If the intel’s wrong about fire destroying the hive, we might need help.”

“Copy that.”

“We’re going in.” Trudy gripped the latch. When Jack gave her a nod, she pushed the door open. A hiss sounded—air pressure releasing.

Jack stepped past the threshold, Trudy following. Inside the warm, humid room, a pale-yellow glow washed over them. A honeycomb-like structure arched over their heads, creating a low tunnel with thumb-sized octagonal holes embedded within the walls, maybe the cells for the spawns. A scarlet light pulsed from each hole, perfectly matching the cadence of the others.

Trudy whispered, “Their hearts are beating as one.”

“A hive mind.” Jack raised his flamethrower. “Shall we test the intel?”

“Cool your jets, cowboy. We’re not in a hurry.” Trudy scanned the tunnel’s curved walls, about ten feet long and eight feet high,

arching over a four-foot-wide concrete path running through it. The hive cells appeared to be divided into six-inch squares with a shallow indentation marking the boundaries.

“Trudy. Check this out.”

She pivoted toward Jack. He pointed at a missing square in the hive matrix near his shoulder. “Think the angels moved a spawn somewhere?”

“Looks like it.” Trudy peered into the hole. The recess, about an arm’s length deep, held only empty air, though markings on one side, written in the language of the angels, likely identified the former occupant.

She stepped back and spread her arms. “This means we still have phony angels, hundreds of them. Kat’s theory was true.”

“Yeah. The force that drew the implanted angels to Chantal didn’t penetrate this pressure-sealed vault.” Jack readied his flamethrower. “Time to dispatch them.”

A buzz sounded. The surrounding light flashed. A voice emanated from somewhere unseen. “Temperature falling to critical level. Open access door detected.”

The door began closing on its own. Jack shouted, “Keep it open! I’ll raise the temperature!”

Trudy dropped the flamethrower, leaped to the entry, and slid into the narrowing gap, her fuel tanks against the jamb and her hands on the door. As it pushed, she pushed back, grunting, “Torch it!”

A stream of fire spewed from Jack’s flamethrower toward the rear of the tunnel. He waved the gun in an arc, igniting every inch of the honeycomb as he backed toward the door. Within seconds, an inferno engulfed the entire tunnel.

The door’s pressure eased, allowing Trudy to push it the rest of the way open and retrieve her gun. They stepped out, closed the door partway, and stood in the corridor at a safe distance. Squeals erupted from the hive along with accompanying pops and sizzles.

Jack grinned. “I love the sound of angel bacon frying.”

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“Behave yourself.” Trudy elbowed him but couldn’t suppress a smile of her own. For the first time in a while, they had accomplished a mission without botching it. “Let’s check in with Ben and Kat.”

“We’ve been listening,” Kat said. “It sounds like a spawn is missing.”

Within the tunnel, the flames roared, sending intense heat into the corridor and forcing Jack and Trudy to back away several more steps. Fortunately, since the vault was lined with metal, it would probably contain the blaze. “Right,” Trudy said. “Any theories?”

“I have a vague memory. While Laramel possessed me, I carried a box through a roomy chamber with stacks of crates, like a big warehouse, but in the memory, everything’s blurred. No labels on the boxes or any other details.”

Jack shrugged off his harness and set the fuel tanks on the floor. “I’ll bet it’s a spawn safe house. Laramel wanted to keep at least one of her little devils locked away in case something happened to the hive.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Kat said. “Laramel was always kind of paranoid, especially about the force she wanted the Refectors to help her neutralize.”

Trudy removed her tanks and laid them near Jack’s. “And we still have no idea what that force is.”

An explosion erupted from the hive room. The door flew off its hinges and hurtled through the corridor, propelled by a comet-like ball of fire. Jack shoved Trudy out of the way. The edge of the door smacked his hip and threw him against her, making them both crash into a wall and fall to the floor.

The door tumbled end over end, and the flaming sphere exploded. Fiery debris scattered and ignited the walls and ceiling, some of it pelting Jack and Trudy.

Trudy batted smoking embers from her hair as she climbed to her feet. The fire continued roaring in the hive room, maybe ready to blast another barrage, and flames crawled closer to the fuel tanks. “We’d better bolt.”



“I’ll second that.” Jack reached a hand up. “Give me a lift. Not sure if my legs are working.”

She grasped Jack’s wrist and pulled. As he rose, he grimaced, then stood on one leg. When they took a step to run, Jack faltered and nearly fell. Trudy pushed a shoulder under his arm. “Lean on me.”

They hustled toward the stairwell, Jack limping heavily while Trudy hauled him along. Another explosion sounded behind them, louder than the first. The building shook, and the corridor’s drop ceiling collapsed in front of the stairway door. Trudy pulled the knob, dragging debris as the door opened. The gap allowed Jack to hop through on one foot. She called over the fire’s roar, “Ben. Kat. You’d better bug out. This building’s going up in flames.”

“Got it,” Ben said. “We’re on our way.”

While Jack and Trudy hobbled up the dim stairway toward the first floor, Iona’s voice broke in. “Headquarters is in sight. The fire’s spreading across the lower level. If you’re already in a stairwell, hightail it to the roof. We’ll pick you up there.”

They struggled together up the next flight, two away from the roof. “We’ll be on top in a couple of minutes,” Trudy said, grunting. “Don’t leave without us.”

“We’re standing in the parking lot,” Ben said. “Pick up Jack and Trudy first, then land here.”

“On our way,” Iona replied. “Punch it, Leo.”



At the parking lot, Ben and Kat stood in the late afternoon’s chilly autumn breeze and eyed the roof of the main HQ building, the central four-story unit in the country-club-like campus. Leo and Iona had landed the angel cruiser and were helping Jack and Trudy into the side hatch. Since the luxury, propeller-driven drone could hold ten passengers, they had plenty of room.

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The smoke forced Ben to rub his eyes before looking again. Although the fire drew closer to the rescuers, they seemed to have plenty of time to escape. No worries.

He curled a hand into a fist. The dreaded headquarters complex was burning to the ground. Good riddance. Now it was time to plan the next step—get the second key from the bank and take over the city temple. But who would be the best choice for completing each mission?

Kat touched his tightened hand. “I know that pose. You have a plot cooking.”

He turned to her and smiled. Her sparkling green eyes seemed able to see straight through him. “You’re right.” He ran a hand through her dark hair, recently cut to a pageboy style for the new mission. “I’m thinking about the two of us storming the temple while the others sneak into the bank to find the second key.”

Kat nodded. “That works as long as—”

“Good,” Iona said through the earbud. “Sneaking is my specialty.”

Leo piped in. “Truer words were never spoken. The sneaky sniper should be registered as a lethal weapon. A small one, perhaps. Poison in a pill bottle.”

Ben mentally cringed. Accidentally leaving the earbud turned on could someday lead to trouble. He covered the error with a laugh. “I’ll bet Iona doesn’t like that description.”

“Hard to tell from here. If she kicks my shins, I’ll let you know. But she might have to stand on a stool to kick that high.”

“Now you’ve guaranteed a shin bruising.” Ben glanced at the roof. Leo was boosting Jack, apparently hobbled by an injury, into the cruiser. Smoke billowed, blocking the view at times. Seconds later, the cruiser lifted off and quickly glided out of the plumes of smoke.

“Leo,” Kat said as she eyed the drone. “Fly around in a safe area until you hear from us again.”

“Will do.”

“How’s Jack?” she asked. “He looked kind of gimpy.”

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“Trudy’s checking him out. She thinks it’s just a nasty bruise, but she wants to make sure.”

“Good. We’re going silent for a little while.” Kat removed her earbud and turned the microphone off, then motioned for Ben to do the same.

When he complied, he gave her a questioning look. “What’s up?”

“Well ...” She flashed a tentative smile, the kind she always used when she was about to say something he might not want to hear.

Ben stayed quiet. He probably needed to hear it. After escaping implantation by an alien only two weeks earlier, his wife, Katherine Garrison, also his counselor and confidante, had returned, a blend of warrior and techno-geek in a lithe but powerful package. “Go on. I’m listening.”

She took a deep breath. “You know I trust your judgment. It’s always been spot on.” Her smile widened. “Well, almost always.”

“Go ahead. Spill it. I’m ready.”

“It’s Iona. You’re thinking about making her the point person for the bank mission, aren’t you?”

He shrugged. “Well, like she said, sneaking is her specialty.”

“No argument on that point.” Kat sighed, her brow bent at a sympathetic angle. “I know you think the world of her. And so do I. But remember, she’s only sixteen. She’s got the heart of a lion. As brave as Trudy was at that age, and that’s saying a lot.”

“True, but I sense a big *but* coming.”

Kat nodded. “Iona is impetuous. Impulsive. Both with her mouth and her actions. No governors on that young woman’s tongue. She’s a great infiltrator, but she’s also a powder keg. She could blow up a mission if she’s not careful.”

“Yeah. I know.” Ben pushed a hand into his pocket. “She needs ... well ... a good coach.”

“Or a father?” Kat set a hand on his cheek. “Like you?”

Ben looked down as he slid the toe of his shoe along the ground. “You see through me like a wide-open window, don’t you?”

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“You hide it well from others, but I know your heart. I mean, what you really want.” Touching his chin, she lifted his head, making eye contact again. “You’ve never even hinted at blaming me for losing our baby, even though it was my fault. You warned me not to go out on that drill when I was preg—”

“Stop.” He pressed a finger against her lips. “Not one more word. Like I told you then, forgiveness is forever.”

She guided his hand out of the way. “Right. And I love you for that. Always have. But since I can’t ever have any children, I’m probably the last person who should warn you about your feelings for Iona. And you do have them.”

He averted his eyes from her ever-piercing gaze. “Yeah. You nailed me, as usual. I can see her as a daughter.” He shrugged. “I guess I want to give her a chance to shine, like most dads want for a daughter.”

“Dads also want to protect their daughters from harm, like you wanted to protect me and our baby. You were right then, and I think you’d be right now to keep Iona in check until she’s ready.”

He regained eye contact. Tears sparkled across her emerald irises. “Sure, but we’re talking about infiltrating a bank. It’s not like spying behind enemy lines. Danger is winding down, not up.”

“I’m not so sure.” Kat set her computer pad on her palm and pointed at an icon on the screen. “Remember I told you that I found a message from Commander Barks?”

Ben nodded. “An encrypted file for you and me.”

“Well, I used the usual password and decrypted it. It’s a video, and I think we should watch it together.”

“Now?” Ben glanced at the sky. The angel cruiser flew in a slow arc nearly overhead. “They’re waiting for us.”

“They can keep waiting. Unless your back’s hurting and you need to rest in one of those cushy lounge chairs.”

“You make resting sound like a bad thing.” Ben stretched his back. The burn scars inflicted by a plasma sphere still stung, but not enough to be crippling. “I’m all right.”

“Good.” She tapped on the icon. A new image filled the screen. Commander Barks sat with his hands folded on a table, facing the camera. Based on the lack of a scar on his jaw from an injury he suffered three years earlier, this recording was at least that old.

Barks removed a patrol cap and ran a hand through his gray crewcut hair. “I’m ready.”

“It’s running, Roland.”

Ben looked at Kat. “Was that Doc?”

She nodded. “He was always more tech savvy than Barks.”

“Good.” Barks gestured to the side with his head. “Now get your butt out of here. This isn’t for your ears.”

“It’s leaving, and the rest of my body’s going with it.”

After a door closed, Barks focused on the camera again. “Ben and Kat, not to be dramatic, but since you’re watching this, I assume that I am dead. You likely discovered this recording in the firebox among my other personal effects with instructions not to view it unless I kicked the proverbial bucket, which means that I am speaking to you from beyond the grave.”

He pressed his thumbs together, his lips tight, as if nervous about his next words. “It’s confession time. You see, I am one of the reasons the angels came to Earth. It’s a long story with many unimportant details, so I won’t bore you with them. Suffice it to say that I played an instrumental part in the angels’ arrival, though I strongly objected to their implantation in humans. Since then, I have done everything in my power to make amends for my mistakes, including a pledge to die for the cause. I can only hope that when you hear this, the angel scourge will have been wiped out.”

Ben whispered, “Wiped out in the nick of time.”

“Right,” Kat said. “But probably not the way he expected it to happen.”

Barks raised a finger. “There is one issue I haven’t discussed with anyone, not even the good doctor, because it sounds like something out of a horror movie.” He picked up his hat and fumbled with the bill. “I suspect there is a great evil behind everything that has

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happened. The angels didn't put Hell's Gate in the sky. It preceded them, and it was always a mystery to them. Someone else put that portal in the sky. Someone else called those parasitic tyrants into our world. Someone else concocted the entire sinister scheme with a more devilish goal in mind. Yet, I don't know who, and I don't know why.

"We have theories, of course, but none answer the overriding question. How could it all happen unless someone wanted it to happen? Cookies don't magically appear from an oven. A baker has to come up with a recipe, mix the dough, grease the cookie sheet. There is intelligence behind the entire process. In short, no baker, no cookies. And the coming of the angels is far more complex than any baking process.

"As I mentioned, I had a part, as did a physician named Dr. Elder and a scientist, Dr. Harrid, an eccentric fellow who disappeared not long after I worked with him."

"Harrid," Ben said. "First time I've heard that name."

Kat nodded. "Same here."

"But we were role players," Barks continued. "The grease. The oven. The dough. Someone else was the baker. And I'm sure you're asking who this baker is." He shrugged. "Frankly, I have no idea, which is why I never talked about it. But I do know that he or she must exist, as surely as I know that a creator God exists. As you realize, this world did not come into existence by itself. It, too, had a baker.

"I tell you this in case you're pondering the same questions I have. Simply put, even if the angels have been eliminated, it doesn't mean our mission has been fully accomplished. The evil baker might still be lurking." Barks looked upward as if wondering what else to say. "That's all. I hope I don't sound like some mad fool." He leaned close. "I should be able to figure out how to turn this blasted thing off without Doc's help. Ah. Here's the switch."

The screen flickered and went blank.

Ben and Kat stared at each other as they let the message sink in. After a moment, Kat turned the pad off. "I agree with Barks."

"You mean there's a great evil lurking behind the scenes?"

"Exactly. And he, she, or it won't give up just because we eliminated the angels. Someone smart enough to pull this off has to have backup plans, you know, Plan B and C. Or maybe the angels were expendable, and Plan A is still going on."

"True. A lot more is going on besides the angels coming here. The alien Refectors replaced them, and somehow they knew they were supposed to live in human bodies with purged souls."

Kat pointed at him. "And don't forget the other force Laramel was worried about. Obviously, the angels weren't the ones in charge."

"I'm with you. There has to be a grand scheme designer. But the reason you showed me the message now was because of Iona's mission. How are they related?"

Kat attached the computer pad to her belt. "A brilliant schemer would see Iona as a vulnerability, an easy target. She's smart and brave, but not seasoned and wise. With this schemer still lurking, the bank mission might not be as easy as you imagine. Maybe danger isn't winding down at all."

Ben glanced at the cruiser again and imagined Iona watching them. Knowing her, she probably wished she could hear every word of this conversation. "Are you saying she shouldn't be part of the mission?"

"I think she can go to the bank. But as a role player. Let's come up with a way to use her talents alongside Leo, Jack, and Trudy. As a learner, not a leader."

"Don't you think giving her more responsibility will help her mature?"

Kat shook her head. "Too soon. Baby steps. I want to see some growth first. Less swagger. More caution."

"Fair enough. We'll work it out. But if the time comes when I need her to step up, I'm giving her the lead. She's already proven that she can carry a huge weight."

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“Like you said. Fair enough.” Kat ran a hand through his hair, copying his earlier gesture, though his crewcut probably felt like a scrub brush, unlike her soft tresses. “You’ll make the right call.” She winked. “Dad.”

The word pinched hard but sounded like sweet music at the same time. “If only. But she might be too independent to look up to me. I’m barely old enough to be her father.”

Kat rolled her eyes. “My husband. Super soldier. Planner extraordinaire. A kind-hearted warrior who can’t see what’s obvious to everyone else.”

“Can’t see?” He cocked his head. “What do you mean?”

“Trust me. Iona looks up to you. Adores you. Give her time. She’ll let you know in her own way.”

Warmth surged through his body. Maybe Iona could never be a real daughter, but knowing that she looked up to him really helped fill the void. “Thanks. I appreciate that.” He grasped Kat’s hand and interlocked their thumbs. “Ready to go for a ride?”

“Ready.” Kat turned her earbud on and reinserted it. “All right, Leo, or Iona, or whoever isn’t too injured from shin kicking. Sail that cruiser down here. Let’s go kick some alien butt.”