

**MY SOUL TO TAKE**

# **THE OCULUS GATE SERIES**

**BOOK ONE: HEAVEN CAME DOWN**

**BOOK TWO: INVADING HELL**

**BOOK THREE: MY SOUL TO TAKE**

**BOOK FOUR: ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HELL**

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# **MY SOUL TO TAKE**

**BOOK THREE IN THE OCULUS GATE SERIES**

**BY**

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My Soul to Take

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## Chapter One

Ben climbed the ladder leading to the top of the swaying Alaska transport tower. Wind-driven snow buffeted his body. Even the parka and gloves he had found among the surrounding corpses couldn't stave off the stabbing chill.

Above, the tower's pair of dish antennas combined their radiant streams to create a multi-colored triad of wriggling lights that snaked east and west around the Arctic Circle. Somewhere beyond the horizons, the streams connected with those of three other towers on the same latitude, forming the boundary of the conduit that could transport a person to another world through the Oculus Gate portal high in the sky.

Below, the ground quaked, making the structure's sway worsen. With each step up the ladder, he searched the tower's lattice-like framework. Dr. Harrid had said he would destroy the tower after Winella transported herself and her son home to Viridi, but so far, there was no sign of explosives or any other means of destruction among the structure's supports.

His gut tossing like a ship in a storm, he paused at the ladder's halfway point and called through his earbud's embedded microphone. "Trudy, this tower's wagging like a puppy's tail. I hope you have something in your medical bag of tricks when I come back down. I'm ready to barf my breakfast."

Her voice entered his ear, barely audible against the whistling wind. "Don't be a wimp, Ben. The poison from that bullet in your head should be long gone by now. Are you going to let the queen of hell get the best of you? Now get your butt up there and stop this earthquake."

## MY SOUL TO TAKE

Another hard tilt forced bile into Ben's throat—hot and acidic. He swallowed it down and climbed on. For some reason, the rungs felt weaker than before, bending under his weight, but they seemed strong enough. “Easy to say when you're not riding this rollercoaster a hundred feet in the air.”

“Hey, macho man, you're the one who volunteered. But I'll give you another dose of nausea meds when you come back. I can grind the tablets into apple juice in a sippy cup for you.”

“You're so funny, Sis.”

“Glad you noticed. Seriously, though, I can give you something stronger, but it'll have to wait till I get back to the tower. Jack and I are checking out the radio relay station to see if we can make a longer distance call for help if we're stranded. Leo and Iona are heading toward the spot where you left the SUV you drove here ... What was it now? A couple of days ago? Anyway, Kat's the only one left at the base of the tower.”

“Copy that.” When Ben reached the top of the ladder and climbed onto the wooden platform, he kept a firm grasp on a side rail while tightening the shoulder straps of a parachute he had found below on a dead giant. The huge man was one of several bestial giants from Viridi who wore parachutes in case the conduit picked them up off the ground during a recent tower network activation. The chute's pack was too big, of course, but perfect for wearing over a parka. It would serve as a safety precaution if the wind tossed him over the side or if the Oculus Gate conduit somehow drew him into its upward pull.

He trudged through accumulated snow to the platform's edge and looked down. Kat stood at ground level, barely illuminated by the antenna streams and the pad's glow in the never-ending darkness of an Arctic winter. As horizontal sheets of flakes whipped her parka's hood off, exposing her pageboy-style hair, she tapped on a computer tablet screen, her feet planted firmly to battle the ongoing quake. She pulled her hood back in place and called through their

earbud connection, shouting to overcome the whistling wind. “I’ve got this tablet synced with the tower. I’m reading the data now.”

Ben adjusted his earbud, but the new position failed to block the competing noise. “Good. Let me know what you find while I try to figure out a safe way to shut this thing down.”

“Go ahead, and I’ll see if I can do it from here. Either way, we’ve got to stop this quake. It’s getting worse by the second.”

“We’ll stop it even if I have to tear the antennas down.” Ben again eyed the pair of antenna dishes—too far above his head to reach. He would have to find something to stand on. “But it makes no sense that Harrid would leave it running. He told Winella that it would shut off with a timer, and then he would destroy it.”

“True, but I don’t see a timer function. I’ll keep looking.”

“Keep me posted.” His grasp still on the railing, Ben leaned closer to one of the antennas. No snow had accumulated on the dish’s concave surface, probably melting on contact with the warm metal. “I think this thing’s been running quite a while.” He turned and looked at Kat again. “No wonder the quake’s so severe.”

She brushed snow from her tablet’s screen. “The data records show a transport through the Oculus Gate exactly fifty-seven minutes and five seconds ago.”

Again battling the wind, Ben shuffled toward the ladder, searching for something to boost him to one of the dishes, Kat still barely in view. He mentally recalled their recent chores since arriving from Viridi through the Oculus Gate—finding Winella’s computer tablet in her and Caligar’s lair, borrowing the clothes from the corpses, and warming the oversized garments in the lair’s fireplace. “Didn’t we get here about an hour ago?”

Kat glanced at her wristwatch. “Yep. Almost to the second. Which means someone probably shot out of here the moment we showed up.”

“Maybe we’re the reason he took the leap. He must’ve been standing well north of the Arctic Circle boundary, out in the launch area. He could probably see us arrive from there.” At the edge of

## MY SOUL TO TAKE

the platform near the ladder, Ben's boot struck something solid. Crouching, he brushed snow away from a metal container the size of a large toolbox, not big enough for the boost he needed to reach an antenna. "I found something. It wasn't here last time. Some kind of gear box, I think."

"What kind of gear?"

"Hang on." Ben flipped the latch open and lifted the lid. Inside, several unlabeled spray cans lay in a haphazard pile. He picked one up—lightweight and nearly empty. He cleared a spot on the platform and sprayed the wood with some of the can's remaining contents. A clear liquid soaked into the fibers, but it had no apparent effect.

He aimed the nozzle at a metal plate connecting two boards and released the spray until it sputtered. The plate sizzled, and smoke shot up from tiny bubbles on the surface.

Images flooded in—dozens of similar connection plates throughout the tower, including many in the weakened rungs he had climbed minutes ago. Rushing down them now might make them break, and the ladder would collapse, giving him no time or room to deploy the parachute.

A brief gust tore through the area. The tower leaned once more and stayed tilted at a precarious angle. "Kat." Ben slowly straightened, battling the wind and the tilt. "The tower's been sabotaged. I have to deploy the chute and jump."

Kat shouted, "Jump toward me. There's a big snowdrift to my right. Wind's going that direction."

"On my way." A firm hand on the parachute's ripcord, Ben crept across bending boards toward the platform's edge, ducking low under the radiant stream connecting the two antennas. A new gust blasted through. As the tower's tilt worsened, the antennas swung downward, and the streams shot into Ben. Light erupted in blinding flashes. Intense heat coursed across his skin. Then, he blacked out.