

ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HELL

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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BOOK FOUR IN THE OCULUS GATE SERIES

BY

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On Earth as it is in Hell

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Chapter One

Ben clutched the console's steering yoke as a gust slapped the hijacked transport pod. It careened to the side and flew toward a treetop, seconds away from collision. He jerked the yoke and dodged the limbs, missing the branches by inches. "Any ideas?" he asked, breathless.

At his side, Kat stood bracing herself with a tight grip on the back of Ben's seat as she studied the console's radar screen. "Veer to the right about ten degrees." Her words shook with the bucking pod. "A little less stormy that way ... I think."

Green lightning flashed, brightening the twilight sky for a moment. Clouds boiled above. From the left, a spinning funnel charged toward them with a deafening roar. "Tornado at nine o'clock! Making the turn." As he shifted the yoke, he glanced at Kat. "Picking up any radio signals? Signs of life?"

She blew her pageboy-style bangs out of her eyes. "This is Viridi, not Earth. I don't think any radio bases exist. And this transport pod doesn't have the infrared trackers. We have to rely on visual."

"And spot Leo in this storm? Impossible." Ben peered through the rain-spattered glass. "But Caligar's parachute might be big enough to see."

"He can't deploy a chute in this wind. It would be suicide."

"Suicide if he doesn't. He can't jump back through the portal." Ben glanced to the rear. The darker clouds appeared to be behind them now, though wind and rain still buffeted the pod. Before their portal jump from the Alaska tower site, Caligar mentioned that the season of storms had begun on Viridi, and the early ones were often monsters. "He knows his planet. Maybe he took a risk and dropped super quick. Deployed the chute at the last second. If he's already on the ground—"

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“Parachute,” Kat said, pointing. “Ten o’clock. Snagged in the treetop.”

Ben swiveled in that direction. At the top of a windblown tree, a limb perforated an oversized parachute. Caligar held to the chute lines from below, swaying and bobbing with the limb’s chaotic lurches. Time and again he pulled on the lines, apparently trying to climb to the limb and maybe catch hold, but with each effort, the wind slung him back. Of course, he could shrug off the pack, but since he hung about eighty feet in the air, he couldn’t possibly survive a drop to the forest floor.

Kat touched the exit door’s handle. “Get us under him and hold steady. I’ll bring him in.”

“Let me do it.” Ben tried to rise, but the bullet wound in his foot sent a knifing stab up his leg, forcing him to sit again. “Give me a second and I’ll—”

“You’re benched, hero. Stay where you are.”

Ben heaved a sigh. She was right ... as usual. “Take something to cover your head and face. The rain is highly acidic here.”

She pulled a cap from her back pocket and put it on, then lifted a neck scarf over her nose. “Don’t worry. I got this.”

“It’s not your abilities I’m worried about.” Ben steered the pod toward Caligar. “It’ll take a miracle for me not to crash this flying tin can in this crazy storm. The driving propellers aren’t exactly hurricane strength.”

“Maybe so, but I believe in you.” Kat opened the door. Wet air rushed in and swirled in the cabin. She whipped a knife from her belt and climbed out onto the pod’s roof, leaving the door to bang against its frame as the windy assault continued.

Ben lowered the pod into the forest, barely fitting between Caligar’s tree and the one next to it. As the beating door fanned stinging droplets against his cheeks, he settled under Caligar’s bobbing legs. With each bob, his shoes struck the metal roof. Now he could safely shrug the pack off, especially with Kat’s help, but only if the pod stayed close.

Kat's voice punched through the roof, muffled. "The lines are wrapped around his chest. I have to cut them off. Hold real steady."

"Easy for you to say." His hands white-knuckle tight around the yoke, Ben battled the gusts, forcing the pod to cut through the blasts. The boots continued drumming against the roof, a good sign, though nerve-racking.

A familiar roar penetrated the pod's cabin. Ben looked toward the source. The tornado ripped through the trees, tossing broken branches in all directions—maybe thirty seconds away. "Twister's coming! Hurry!"

Kat grunted. "Stay put. One more line to cut."

A branch slammed against the side of the pod. Glass shattered. New gusts punched through. The branch's jagged end butted Ben's shoulder like a sharp battering ram, throwing his hands from the yoke.

He slapped the branch away and regripped the yoke. The tornado spun closer and closer. Debris flew in a swirl, veiling nearly everything. The pod lurched, kicked, rocked. In seconds, they would be blown away. "Kat! Update!"

No voices responded. No shoes pounded the roof. Only the roar of the tornado filled the pod as it drew closer and closer.

"Kat!"

Something slapped the roof. "We're secure! Go!"

Ben shoved the throttle. The pod zoomed forward, angling toward the chaotic sky as the exit door banged again and again. The moment they broke into the clear, Ben reversed course, flew behind the tornado, and landed in its debris-strewn path.

He leaped out and looked at the pod's roof, blinking to see through the sheets of rain. Kat and Caligar sat on top, the parachute tied around their torsos as well as a roof antenna.

No longer wearing her cap, Kat pushed her hair back and smiled. "What a ride! I knew you could do it."

Caligar untied the chute and rose to his full ten-foot height, a large pack on his back. "It was, indeed, a harrowing ride. Although

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I did not expect to see you here, I am grateful that you came. Releasing myself from the clutches of that tree would have been time consuming, perhaps impossible.”

Ben nodded. “Especially with a tornado coming at you.”

When Kat freed herself, she and Caligar made their way to ground level. The trio crowded into the pod, their hair and clothes dripping. Ben sat in the pilot’s chair, Kat cross-legged on the floor next to him, and Caligar with his back to the rear cabin wall as he stripped water from his long braid, his parachute pack sitting next to him.

He blinked his huge eyes at Ben and Kat. “Why *are* you here? Have the plans changed?”

“Well ...” Ben glanced at Kat as she pulled her saturated shirt away from her skin. She gave him a resigned shrug. Caligar needed to know everything.

Ben focused on the giant’s curious face. “Short version. Iona’s in Alex’s clutches in the angel cruiser, as planned, but Leo tried to save her by grabbing a landing runner. Alex flew through the Gate with Leo dangling below. We thought he might have fallen, but we’re not sure, so we followed to see if we could rescue him. The storm squashed that mission.”

Caligar nodded. “This has been a bad one, worse than any I ever saw on Earth, though I have seen a few like it here.”

“I saw green lightning,” Ben said. “Does Viridi get any other weather that we don’t get on Earth?”

“Also red lightning, but I don’t think there are any other material differences. Tornadoes are rarer on Viridi than on Earth. I have seen only one other here in my lifetime. It is highly unlikely that another will arise. We are safe here for the time being.”

Ben glanced at the boiling sky. Getting an encouraging update from a native of this planet helped him breathe more easily. “Speaking of safe, are you concerned about your family? Do Winella and Bazrah know what to do when a storm like this comes?”

“I am concerned, but Winella is well versed in weather forecasting. I’m sure she and Bazrah hurried to our refuge when she realized this storm was brewing.”

“Oh. A refuge. Not your observatory tower.”

“Correct.” Caligar set an elbow on his knee with his arm upright and waved it back and forth. “The tower is vulnerable in storms. High winds can force it into a sway, and it could topple. That’s why I dug out a refuge in a cliff face within a half-hour’s walk from the tower. The cave is not high in comfort level, but it is safe, dry, and well-supplied with food and technology. In fact, I installed a radio that receives and records a constant live audio feed from the tower. That way, I would know if any intruders are there while I am at the refuge.”

“Good thinking,” Ben said. “I suppose you’ll want to check on them as soon as possible.”

“At the proper time, but I am confident in Winella. She excels at watching over our ... over Bazrah. All will be well.” Caligar’s shoulders drooped, and he let out a sigh.

“What’s wrong?” Kat asked.

Caligar looked at her. “My own words are like a dagger. I almost said our children, but Alex killed Lacinda, my daughter, and she will not return to me. All will not be well.”

Ben set a hand on Caligar’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, my friend. I’ve been so focused on saving Earth from that evil witch, I haven’t considered the catastrophe she inflicted on your family. Losing a daughter has to be devastating.”

“It is, but you have no reason to apologize. Although I am glad that you consider me a friend, I have not earned that label. I betrayed you. I threw you into hell as a way to try to save Lacinda.”

Ben compressed his shoulder. “I forgave you. You have proven your friendship—”

Caligar batted Ben’s hand away. “I have proven nothing!”

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Ben and Kat looked at each other, then again at Caligar. Kat spoke in a soft tone. “As you said, we’re safe for now. We have some time. Tell us what’s on your mind.”

A tear trickled down his cheek. “I betrayed the most courageous man I have ever met, and for what? A promise from a witch in hell. Yes, I did it to save my daughter, but I am still guilty of a heinous act. I had no faith that Lacinda could be rescued without my treachery. In my wretched cowardice, I chose a foolish option based on fear, something that I know Benjamin or Katherine Garrison never would have done.”

Silence descended except for the sound of wind whistling through the broken window. After a long moment, Ben spoke up. “I don’t have a daughter. I can’t imagine how difficult that decision must have been.”

Caligar pointed a finger at him. “But you understood sacrifice. The second time you entered hell, you chose to go to rescue Iona. When I threw you in earlier, I had a similar choice, to go in myself to save Lacinda, but I opted to trust Alex instead.” He rolled a hand into a fist. “There is no use trying to minimize the evil of my actions, and I cannot go back and undo my terrible choice. It’s impossible.” He withdrew a knife from a belt sheath. “But this I can do. I make an oath that I will never betray you again. I will never trust that witch again. I will reflect the courage and steadfastness that I see in you.” He drew his braid in front. “Cutting off my braid and offering it to you in a handshake is the most solemn of vows on Viridi. I hope you will accept it.”

As he set the knife to the braid, Ben raised a hand. “No, Caligar. Don’t cut your braid.”

Caligar paused. “Why not?”

“I don’t need your solemn vow. I believe you without it. Save the vow for someone who wouldn’t trust you otherwise.”

Caligar stared at Ben for a long moment before sliding the knife back into its sheath. “I see the wisdom in this.” He brushed a tear with a knuckle. “We should move on. The life of our friend Leo

might be at stake. It is clear that, to you, he has been like family, and now he is to me as well. We must do all we can for family.”

Ben gazed into the giant’s mournful eyes. What could anyone say that would assuage his damaged conscience? Considering the circumstances, they shouldn’t continue plowing unproductive ground. “You’re right. For family. We’ll focus on Leo.”

“Yes,” Kat said, her brow tight. “If Leo survived, we have another potential problem. He thinks Ben and I are dead. If he made it into the cruiser and told Iona, then she thinks so, too. Not sure what problems that might cause, but we need to be aware.”

Ben pointed at her. “Exactly right. And Alex will use Iona’s confusion against her.”

Caligar opened his pack and looked inside. “Have you confirmed Alex’s goal for coming here?”

Kat shook her head. “Not really. We’re still pretty sure she wants Viridi for herself, but I think she’s vindictive enough to try to destroy Earth. The devices her minions built under the Alaska tower looked more massive and complex than when the tower was just part of a conduit-generating network.”

“Then we should move on.” Caligar spread a hand toward the pod’s control console. “May I suggest that we fly to my portal mirror on the mesa? Alex’s only information about Viridi must have come from Dr. Harrid, and he might have told her how to use the mirror in ways about which I am unaware, perhaps with a destructive result for Earth. With the landscape so similar in most places, she could still have trouble finding it, especially in this storm. Perhaps we can arrive before she does.”

Ben clenched his jaw. After all the talk about being *for family*, ending the search for Leo felt like abandoning a family member, giving up on a loyal friend and ally, but his chances of survival were almost nonexistent, and Iona was in Alex’s clutches. Caligar’s suggestion made sense. They had to choose to follow Iona’s trail while they could.

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He looked at Kat. “Can you track Iona’s transmitter?”

“Maybe.” She rose and tapped a finger on her chin as she studied the pod’s controls and readouts. “The radio is less sophisticated than a SkySweep drone’s, but it looks like it can scan for signals. Iona’s tracker frequency is on the standard range.”

“Then we can find Iona even if Alex isn’t heading for the portal mirror.”

Kat nodded firmly. “Yeah. I think so.”

Ben mimicked her nod. With no leads to Leo’s location, rescuing the fiery redhead from Alex was far more important. “Then let’s brave the storm and get back in the air. We’ll go to the mesa first, orient ourselves, and figure out what to do next.”



Iona sat next to Leo in the luxury cruiser’s passenger compartment while Alex piloted the craft in the cockpit, her hands tight on the steering column. With only her shoulder-length blonde hair and black leather jacket visible, Alex’s eyes stayed out of view as she battled windswept rain and beating gusts. Completely focused on the storm, she was too busy to worry about what her two hostages might do.

Iona lowered her cloak’s hood and gazed out her side window at the forest far below as she fingered the cross dangling at the end of its leather-cord necklace. She and Leo couldn’t jump out. That would be suicide. And hijacking the cruiser was impossible because Alex had made herself the only pilot the computer would recognize. Only she could fly it, and only Kat could undo that command. Either escape attempt would end with a fatal crash to the ground.

Using a fingertip, Iona touched a tiny bulge in her camo pants pocket. The tracking transmitter Ben had given her lay inside. Since he and Kat were dead, it could never lead a rescuer to her location. But it held in its memory a mysterious tune that might be able to rescue everyone on two planets. All she had to do was play the tune

in front of a special mirror and get Alex to touch the reflection. Then Alex would plunge through the mirror's portal and go straight to hell. At least that was the theory.

Iona let out a quiet sigh. Unfortunately, Alex had taken the mirror, a small square that Iona had hidden, but not well enough. Although she had managed to keep the transmitter out of sight, it wouldn't do any good without the mirror.

Her bladder pinched. It had been several hours since she had emptied it. At the moment, the storm had eased a bit. Maybe now was a good time to go.

Just as she unbuckled her seatbelt, a hefty gust shoved the cruiser hard to the right, tipping them to a sharp angle. The force tossed Iona against the window.

Leo grabbed her arm. "I've got you." As the cruiser regained its flying angle, he pulled her back to her seat.

"Why weren't you buckled?" Alex shouted from the cockpit, her silvery eyes glinting as she glared at them.

"I have to use the toilet." Iona fastened her belt. "It felt safe."

"It's not. Worse weather is ahead. You can wet yourself for all I care, but I don't want you getting thrown around the cruiser. Now stay buckled and hunker down until I say otherwise."

Iona folded hands on her knees and leaned forward. Leo bent low as well, his face only inches from hers. As they rode out the worsening bounces, she gazed at his rugged profile, his swarthy chin and cheeks covered by thick stubble and his mane of dark hair nearly touching his shoulders. With her red hair, fairer skin, and freckles, she looked nothing like him, no sign that they were biologically father and daughter. And with herself decked out in camo under a reddish Reaper's cloak and him in a black huntsman cloak, they didn't even look like they fought for the same team.

Even so, they were related, a fact revealed not so many hours earlier. And her mother was Charlie ... or Charlotte ... the Reaper she had met in hell, now dead because she sacrificed herself to open the gates of hell to let her newfound daughter escape.

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Iona set the cloak's sleeve against her lips and kissed it. Charlie's soul also escaped hell, not physically, but as a disembodied spirit dwelling within these reddish-brown fibers. It seemed that she vanished after helping Iona reattach her own soul to her body. Being outside the fibers for a moment probably caused her to get whisked away to heaven. She gave up everything to save a daughter she barely knew.

Iona breathed a quiet sigh. At least she had the cloak. Earlier, Alex had taken the cloak to search the fibers, thinking Charlie's soul might be there, but when the search failed, Alex gave the cloak back to Iona, merely a keepsake now, but a treasured one.

A tear crept to Iona's eye. She brushed it away and grasped her cross. She couldn't let her mother die in vain. She had to keep fighting Alex in Charlie's name. And maybe now that she and Leo had an excuse to hunker low, it might be a good time to formulate a plan.

She whispered, "We've got to do something."

Leo looked at her with bloodshot eyes, probably a leftover symptom from having his soul stripped from his body and later restored in a violent manner. "Have you been mulling an escape option?"

"Nothing new. I've already told you everything I can think of."

"Which wasn't much."

"Tapping out a message in code is slow. I couldn't risk Alex listening."

Leo lowered his voice further. "I know. I know. But she's distracted now."

Iona lifted her brow. "Any ideas?"

"Well, I had some time to do a little mulling myself." The cruiser bounced hard, making them knock their heads together. Leo drew back and winced. "Jolts like that make my soul's reattachment points throb. At least I think that's what's happening. It's hard to keep my thoughts in a straight line. Maybe the genius ginger will brainstorm with me."

Iona rolled her eyes, but protesting the genius label would only give rise to another of Leo's nicknames for her. "Great. Let's do it."

He leaned closer, nearly nose to nose. "Alex has no direct use for me. I am a burden to her and, because of my size and skills, a potential danger. But she hasn't killed me, which means she'll probably try to use me as leverage against you."

Iona nodded. "Makes sense. Go on."

"And I think she's counting on that leverage to get you to meet with Satan."

Iona cringed. "So you know about that."

Smiling, Leo touched his nose. "You can't hide much from me."

"Your nose didn't tell you about a meeting with Satan."

"No. Damien did. But my nose leads me to the next part of my plan. When we land and the door opens, I will attack Alex and try to take the mirror from her. During the scuffle, you will escape into the storm. Run as fast and as far as you can. It doesn't matter where. I'll find you."

"Because of your nose."

He touched his nose again. "Exactly."

"Only if you can escape from Alex. That's a big *if*. And how will you take the mirror from her? Is it even on her right now?"

Leo nodded. "Jacket. Left pocket. I see her feeling it from time to time."

Iona scrunched her brow. Why would Alex check the mirror? Because of its truth-telling abilities? Was she able to listen in on their conversation even under these circumstances?

Iona whispered. "Back to tapping code. Just in case."

"Compromise. Tap out new information. Speak vaguely about what we've already decided."

Iona nodded and tapped a finger on her knee. *After you find me, what next? Ben and Kat are dead. We will be stranded on Viridi.*

Leo tapped on his own knee. *Jack and Trudy are alive. They will look for us.* His thick eyebrows bent low as he added out loud, "Eventually."

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Another hard bounce rocked the cruiser, making them clutch their hand rests. Iona leaned even closer to Leo and whispered, “Alex might be a far better fighter than you think. She might kick your butt.”

“Then my kicked butt ...” Leo tapped, *will at least give you time to get away. You have the tracker. If I don't find you, Jack and Trudy will.*

“Leo ... I mean, Dad ...”

He set his hand over hers. “Keep calling me Leo. That’s what we’re both used to.”

“All right.” Iona took a deep breath. “Leo, I didn’t go on this mission to be *safe*.” She tapped the rest of her message. *I came to send Alex to hell. Impossible without the mirror.*

His finger taps accelerated. Apparently his brain was working better now. *I realize that. One of us needs to take it from her. But even if we fail, there are other portal mirrors. Jack and Trudy know about them.* Leo settled back in his seat and mumbled, “Anyway, that’s what I’ve been mulling.”

Iona began tapping on his elbow. *I'm worried about you, taking all the risks while I'm running like a coward.*

“You’re no coward.” He tapped his finger next to hers. *We can't battle Alex if we're in her clutches. We have to escape.* He leaned close again, speaking with a firm whisper. “I caught hold of this ship’s landing runner to save you, and that’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

When Iona opened her mouth to answer, Alex barked, “I see the portal mesa. We’ll be landing in a minute. Hold on tight. This could be a rough descent.”

Iona clutched Leo’s hand and whispered, “It’s show time.”