

CHAPTER 1

01 MAY

*Life is not fair. And neither are the Trials. —
Anonymous player.*

“Jamie, come quickly. You have to see this!”

Mum’s cry of alarm was muffled by the large headphones I had on, but even so, the sense of her distress filtered through my clanmates’ panicked voices over the team chat.

Our battle against the world boss was not going well. *And now it’ll go even worse*, I thought as I surged out of my chair. But there was no helping it, Mum needed me.

“Guys,” I said, breaking in through the team’s frantic chatter. “My mum’s in trouble. I gotta go.” I ripped off my headset. “What is it, Ma?” I shouted. Hurrying out of the room, I dashed into the lounge as fast as my gimp leg would allow.

“The news!” said my diminutive mother the moment I appeared in the cramped room.

The... news? I stifled a groan. Had I just abandoned my clan’s epic fight for the latest media craze? *The guys are not going to let me live this one down.* “It’s just the news, Ma,” I said soothingly. “Bad stuff happens all the—”

Overworld, Book 1 of the Dragon Mage Saga

“Shush, Jamie and listen!” Mum said, clutching blindly at my arm. Her eyes never left the television screen.

She hasn't heard a word I said, I thought.

“Look!” she exclaimed and pointed with a trembling finger at our battered telly.

I sighed. I wasn't going to get back into the fight, at least not until I calmed her down. And besides, it was probably too late already. A man down, the clan must have wiped by now. I followed her arm—and blinked.

“...it's the breaking news of the hour,” the news presenter was saying. “Ninety-foot-tall structures of unknown origin have appeared all over the world. Experts believe...”

The presenter's words faded away as my attention was grabbed by the images on display. The newsfeed was filled with a close-up shot of one of the objects in question, in what appeared to be New York's Central Park. Expanding from the ground up, seemingly as if it had stood there for all eternity, was a most absurd and unnatural structure.

The artefact—*what else to call it?*—was formed of a silver metal with a faint tinge of red. Given the perspective of the background, I could tell the object was immense. But for all that, its design was disturbingly simple. Made of four metal pieces

arranged in a rectangular shape, the artefact could have been mistaken for a window frame or doorway—if not for its size and strange composition. *What is that metal? Some sort of steel?*

I scratched my head in confusion. Was this a prank? Why would anyone create the object, much less place it in the middle of a city? I patted Mum’s hand comfortingly and slipped out of her white-knuckled grip. Hobbling closer to the television, I leaned forward for a better look.

My initial assumption had been wrong.

The artefact was not as simple as it had appeared at first glance. The inside of the structure wasn’t empty. Instead, it was filled with a near-translucent shimmering curtain of red. The crimson-touched metal borders were not as plain as I had originally assumed either. Inscribed on their surface, barely visible in the less-than-ideal resolution of the broadcast, were flowing patterns that seemed to be writing of some sort.

The text did not appear to be of earthly origin.

Frowning, I leaned back.

“What is it?” asked Mum. Her voice was worried and she stayed well back from the television.

“I don’t know, Ma,” I murmured. *It has to be fake news*, I decided. I pulled out my phone and searched the web for corroboration while I listened to the broadcast with half an ear.

Overworld, Book 1 of the Dragon Mage Saga

“...what do you make of it, Timothy?”

“I don’t know, Janice. This has to be a hoax, but with more than fifty confirmed sightings across the globe, it is a pretty elaborate one, not to mention expensive.”

“A hoax, Timothy? I can’t see that. I mean, the sheer scale of the resources required to pull off something like this... It defies belief. And what would be the point?”

“What else could it be, Janice?”

“You don’t think there is anything to what our commenters are saying? For the folks at home who may have missed our earlier interviews, some experts believe the objects are not of earthly origin, but the work of extra-terrestrials.”

“Aliens! Be serious, Janice,” Timothy said with an amused chuckle. He waved his arms vaguely above his head. “Even if there *were* aliens out there, surely they would have smarter ways of initiating first contact than what is for all intents and purposes, big metal windows?” He shook his head in disbelief. “The very notion is absurd.”

I tuned out Janice’s reply.

There was not much point in paying further attention to the newsfeed. It was clear the presenters were as clueless as I was. But as farfetched as it sounded, the existence of the structures seemed indisputable.

Multiple sources on the web confirmed the sighting of at least fifty-three of the artefacts. And while speculation was rife amongst internet pundits, bloggers, and forum-goers about the origins of the artefacts, no one was questioning the authenticity of the sightings. The existence of the structures, it seemed, was accepted fact—even on the internet.

There were multiple theories about the objects already. Some believed the artefacts to be the work of aliens, and others that they were clever illusions created by the government. Some suggested that the inscriptions were an ancient form of Egyptian hieroglyphics, others that the structures signalled the return of Atlantis. And *those* were the saner hypotheses.

“Jamie, what is this all about?” Mum asked, her voice uncertain. “How can any of this be happening?”

I looked up from my phone to her stricken face. “I don’t know, Ma,” I repeated.

Walking back to her, I took her careworn hands, calloused and wrinkled from decades of back-breaking work, into my own, which were still smooth and unmarred by age. “Whatever those strange artefacts are, no one seems to understand their purpose. Yet.” I squeezed her hands

Overworld, Book 1 of the Dragon Mage Saga

reassuringly. “The government will figure it out soon.”

“What do we do?” she asked, still anxious.

I kept my own face impassive, careful not to betray my concern both for her and the situation of the world outside. Mum’s mental state was precariously balanced most days, and with today’s shocking news, she seemed even worse off than usual.

Life had taken a toll on her. Despite having almost no education to speak of, no family, a deadbeat husband, and one hungry kid to feed, clothe, and educate, she had succeeded in providing me with the opportunities she had missed.

She had worked two jobs—and sometimes three—in an effort to fund my education. Now, at the age of twenty-four and a working professional, it was my turn to take care of her.

Though, I couldn’t help but worry I was failing.

Day by day, despite all the doctors and medication, Mum’s condition steadily deteriorated. A form of dementia, the doctors called it. Give the meds time to work, they said. She will recover, they said.

But it had been nearly a year now since Mum had stopped working—nearly a year of endless medication. And her condition only seemed to

worsen. I squeezed her hands. I could not afford to lose her.

“Come sit, Mum,” I said. “Let’s watch the news together. I’m sure that this will all turn out to be just a big mistake. A hoax,” I said, quoting the presenter.

But I did not believe it myself.

* * *

Three days went by, and no one appeared any closer to solving the mystery of the artefacts. Every day more of the objects appeared, until by the end of the third day it seemed that every town and city in the world had one.

The artefacts, though, were not identical.

While they all shared the same basic characteristics—rectangular design, identical dimensions, and borders inscribed with alien runes—observers had noted that there were nearly as many structures with a shimmering field of green as those with a curtain of red. Artefacts of other colours were also witnessed. A small, but significant percentage, of the objects had translucent fields of orange, blue, and black.

Even our own town, small and unnoteworthy of attention as it was, received one of the structures. Looking out my bedroom window, I had a clear view

Overworld, Book 1 of the Dragon Mage Saga

of the artefact, a mammoth structure some two hundred yards away. It had appeared yesterday, suddenly and without anyone noticing, in the car park of the town's only shopping mall.

Like other officials all over the world, our mayor had little idea what to make of the artefact, or for that matter, what to do about it. Eventually, he had settled on cordoning off the area and ignoring its glaring presence.

But that had not stopped the curious and bold from exploring. Even now, many of the town's residents wandered around the structure and touched its strangely textured surface that scientists had confirmed as being of unearthly origin.

Some of the more adventurous souls had even hopped through its shimmering curtain. Despite reports from across the globe that the translucent field had no noticeable effect on human or animal anatomy it was still a foolish risk to take, in my opinion.

As for myself, I itched to go out and take a closer look at the strange artefact, but Mum's anxiety had worsened over the last few days, and I could scarce leave her sight.

Thankfully my boss was a kind and understanding soul. I had been forced to call in sick from work and had spent every day since the

announcement in front of the couch with Mum, soothing her worry with my presence.

It was no surprise then, that I was slumped on the couch and gazing listlessly at the television when the expert commenters' endless—and fruitless—speculation was interrupted by what would prove to be a most momentous event.

“I’m sorry, Doctor Theisen,” said the anchor Janice, cutting off one of the commenters, “but we have to interrupt the show with a live broadcast from New York City, where a most extraordinary event is taking place.” The newsfeed jumped to a reporter shifting excitedly from foot to foot. “Rebecca,” continued Janice, “can you tell us what is going on there?”

Rebecca bobbed her head. “Yes, Janice. If the appearance of the structures was not astonishing enough, events have turned even more bizarre. Across the world, faces have been spotted in the artefacts. Even in the one in our very own New York!”

“I’m sorry, Rebecca, did I hear you right?” asked the anchor in a confused voice. “Did you say *faces*?”

“I did, Janice,” said Rebecca, speaking rapidly. “To be clear though, it is a two-dimensional image of a face and not an actual one. Our experts now believe the artefacts to be some sort of visual projection device. But the most amazing aspect

Overworld, Book 1 of the Dragon Mage Saga

about all this is that the face bears no human resemblance. By all appearance it is of alien origin!”

“I’m not sure I understood you—”

“Sorry to interrupt, Janice,” said Rebecca. “We have just been told that the alien has begun speaking through the London artefact and in English too! Yes, you heard right, the alien has started communicating in a language we can—”

The reporter broke off and held up a hand while she listened intently to her earpiece for a moment. “Apologies to you and our listeners, Janice. We have more information coming through. My producer tells me the alien is now also speaking from the structures in Washington and Berlin. We anticipate it will speak from the New York artefact soon as well. Stand by while we take you to a live feed of that right now!”

What the—? I jerked upright on the couch.

“This can’t be true, can it?” Mum asked, her nails sinking into my arm. “It all has to be some sort of sick joke.”

I patted her absently, but didn’t take my eyes off the television. Mum was right. All of this sounded too preposterous to be believed. Surely, the reporter was mistaken. Nonetheless it was riveting to watch.

A second later, the newsfeed jumped to an aerial shot of the New York artefact from one of the overlooking buildings. I leaned forward. Within the

hazy red curtain of the structure, I beheld a face—an *inhuman* yet distinctly humanoid face.

My jaw dropped open in astonishment as I studied the alien.

The alien's facial features were *instantly* recognizable to me, courtesy of a lifetime spent reading science fiction novels and playing RPGs. With flaring nostrils, two upwards protruding tusks from its lower jaw, and deep-set sunken eyes, the face in the object was a spitting image of an... orc.

An orc? Really?

The aliens who had caused strange artefacts to appear all over Earth were orcs? I shook my head in disbelief.

Seeing my reaction, Mum asked, "What is it?"

Before I could answer her though, the orc began speaking, his voice a low rumble that hinted at leashed power. "People of Earth, I am Warlord Duskar Silverbane, chieftain of the Fangtooth tribe and supreme ruler of the Orcish Federation." He paused dramatically. "And now Earth. By the laws of Overworld and the Trials that govern it, I claim your planet and you, the humans that infest it, as mine."

Duskar smiled. It was not a pleasant sight, and seemed to be filled with a promise of suffering to come. "You doubt my words. I can smell your rebellious thoughts even from here. But you will

Overworld, Book 1 of the Dragon Mage Saga

learn. Serve or die, those are the only choices before you. Yours is not the first world I have laid claim to, nor will it be the last.”

He chuckled, the sound reverberating ominously from the artefact. “By the dictates of the Trials, there are a few facts I am obliged to convey. Listen closely. I will not repeat myself.

“Your world is being subsumed into Overworld. In two weeks the process will be complete. Thereafter, your planet shall cease to exist. It will be gone from the universe, its energy, matter” — Duskar bared his filed teeth in another ugly smile — “and all its plentiful creatures, will be absorbed into Overworld as grist to fuel the Trials.

“If you don’t wish to be consumed along with your world, you will enter the gates before then.” Duskar’s clawed hand appeared and gestured lazily at the borders of the artefact rimming his image. “The gates will open tomorrow, and they will stay open for exactly two weeks. My men will await your arrival and take your oaths. Only those who pledge loyalty to me will be allowed into Overworld. Those who resist will be put to the sword. And in case you think deceit will save you, the Trials take pledges made in its name *very* seriously.” He sneered. “You will not enjoy the consequences of severing such oaths, believe me. Goodnight, humans.”

Duskar's face vanished, and the newsfeed cut back to the anchor, whose mouth worked soundlessly, not knowing quite what to say. "Well there you have it—"

I switched off the television and swung round to face Mum. "What do we do, Jamie?" she asked, her face pale.

"I don't know, Ma," I said staring out the window at the distant gate. "I just don't know."

CHAPTER 2

03 MAY

We shall rule Overworld. If not today, then tomorrow. This, I promise you. —Duskar Silverbane.

As it turned out, Duskar was not the only alien the world got to see that night. Following closely on the heels of his speech another—more palatable one—was given from the gates of shimmering green.

“People of Earth, most of you have no doubt already heard the words of the tyrant, Duskar,” said the woman on the screen.

Mum and I were glued to the television again. Like Duskar before her, the woman’s skin was tinged green. Yet her other features couldn’t have been more different. Her ears peaked to a point, her face was thin and sharp, and her eyes were wide and round.

Unsurprisingly, given the woman’s looks, she identified herself as an elf. As the elven queen: Ionia, ‘leader of the free elven people of Overworld,’ to be exact.

“While Duskar spoke true,” Ionia said, her lips thinned and green eyes sparkling with fury, “the

wretch has not given you all the truth. Your world is being forcibly consumed at the *behest* of Duskar. The tyrant has initiated the process without your consent. A most heinous crime, but regrettably one that cannot be reversed.”

The elven queen bowed her head and her flowing green locks shielded her gaze, but not before revealing eyes heavy with sorrow.

I frowned. The gesture seemed deliberate, and a tad too artful to be natural. *Just how practiced was Ionia’s speech?*

A moment later, the elven queen lifted her head and continued, “It is the practice of the Elven Protectorate to only voluntarily subsume new worlds. However, now that Duskar has begun the process, it cannot be stopped. The best I can offer you is the opportunity to join our cause and escape a lifetime of slavery under the orcs.

“Many of you must be wondering about Overworld. I will tell you what I can.” Ionia paused, seemingly to gather her thoughts. “Overworld is an ever-shifting land created by the long-vanished Elders in a dimension removed from your own. Just as you are being assimilated now, many millennia ago the orcish and elven people were also brought to this world.

“Even after centuries, we can only guess at the Trials’ ultimate purpose, but one thing is certain:

Overworld, Book 1 of the Dragon Mage Saga

the Trials have fashioned Overworld into a test, one whose objective is to evolve its inhabitants into stronger images of themselves. Why, however, remains a mystery.

“Know that if you enter the Trials, you will be journeying into a world of conflict, a world where you will be constantly challenged. Overworld is a harsh land. Survival there will be difficult if not impossible on your own. Know, too, that if you choose to accept our aid, my people and I will be there to help you every step of the way.” Ionia’s lips widened into a benevolent smile, entreating us with both her beauty and words.

Again, there seemed to be something off about the elven queen’s mannerisms. *She is trying too hard*, I thought. My suspicions hardened.

More and more, I was certain Ionia’s speech was staged to appeal to a trapped and confused populous. To my cynical eye, at least. So, was Ionia truly as altruistic as she appeared, or did the elves have less noble motives for coming to humanity’s aid?

I knew what *my* money was on.

“As new entrants into Overworld, your species will not be entirely without protection,” the elven queen continued. “The Trials has granted humanity its own territory. This land, the newly created Human Dominion, will be seeded with wildlife and

monsters from all over Overworld and its multitude of subsumed worlds. The Human Dominion will be shielded for exactly one Overworld year, during which time it will be protected from invasion.”

Ionia raised a cautionary finger. “But do not think this means you are safe. The monsters and non-sentient creatures in humanity’s territory are dangerous enough. You will likely find your fledging outposts and camps overrun time and again. And that is not all. Duskar, as the initiator of your world’s assimilation, is considered mankind’s Patron.”

The elven queen all but spat out the last words. She took a calming breath before continuing. “The Trials permit Duskar alone to send troops into the wilds of your Dominion, both to protect and police humanity. Do not despair though. The elves have won the honour of serving as one of humanity’s Sponsors. While this does not grant us the same rights as Duskar, the Trials allow us to create cities within your Dominion to shelter humanity from both its Patron and the dangers of Overworld.”

Ionia directed her gaze into the cameras, seeming to stare into my—and every other watching human’s—eyes. “I implore you to enter Overworld through one of the elven gates. If you do, you will find yourself within one of our sponsored cities. I promise no pledges of loyalty will be

Overworld, Book 1 of the Dragon Mage Saga

demanded from you. My people will do everything to help you. We will provide you with shelter, in return for a fair exchange of goods and resources. Goodbye, and fare thee well, humans.”

* * *

The elven queen’s speech caused as much consternation as Duskar’s had. Every major media and news outlet spent countless hours playing over her words and dissecting the meaning beneath.

But more than the words themselves, experts mulled over the minor miracle that throughout the world, *everyone* who heard the orcish and elven leaders, understood them—even those who spoke no English.

It turned out that the initial reports had been wrong: the overworlders’ speech was not English. Nor was it Russian, or Chinese, or any other known human language, yet amazingly each person who had heard the overworlders understood their every word. It was a marvel that had human scientists flummoxed, and had the craziest claiming it to be magic.

The internet, too, was rife with speculation. A new and ‘fresh’ article, blogpost, and forum post appeared every minute, each fixated with the orcish and elven leaders’ speech and mannerisms.

But, there was a third speech, too. One that went largely unnoticed by the media, and that unbeknownst to me was already causing a stir among a very select group of individuals.

My phone rang insistently. I glanced down.

It was Eric. He had called three times already. Engrossed in the broadcast of the elven queen's speech and its aftermath, I had somehow missed my phone's ringing.

"Hi, Eric," I said. "You watching this? First orcs, now elves. What is the world coming to?"

Eric chuckled. "You haven't seen anything yet, man."

About to launch into my own analysis of Ionia's speech, I paused. "What do you mean?"

"Have you listened to the gnomes yet?"

"Gnomes? You pulling my leg?" But I already knew he wasn't. If there were elves and orcs, why not gnomes?

"Nah, man, I'm not," Eric said. "The gnomish leader was the one who gave the third speech. I take it you haven't heard it yet then?"

"No," I replied. "The news channel didn't seem to have any footage of that speech for some reason. I'd been meaning to find a recording on the web, but got side-tracked watching the 'experts' dissect the other speeches."

"Well, you gotta watch it," Eric said.

Overworld, Book 1 of the Dragon Mage Saga

“Which gates are the gnomes?” I asked. The colours of the artefacts, we had learned, marked the controlling species. Duskar’s speech had been broadcast from the red gates, and Ionia’s from every green structure.

“The blue ones,” Eric replied.

“Ah,” I breathed. The blue artefacts were the least populous and explained why footage of the gnomish leader’s speech was scarce. It was likely that none of the news channels had been in position to catch the speech.

It did leave me wondering about the orange and black gates though. No speeches had been given from them yet. *Which species control those gates?*

I shrugged, dismissing the errant thought. We would find out soon enough, I suspected. “So what did the gnomes talk about?” I asked Eric. “Something different?”

My friend chuckled again. “You could say that,” he said before being consumed by a bout of laughter that left me scowling. I pulled the phone away from my ear and stared at it.

Eric was my best friend, but sometimes I wanted to strangle him. “Come on Eric, don’t leave me hanging. What did you hear?”

Eric’s laughter faded to sputters. “The gnomes,” he finally gasped, “claim to be the first Overworld species to have discovered Earth. They *claim* that

for the last few centuries, they have been preparing humanity for voluntary assimilation. They *claim* to have injected their own stories into human histories—can you believe that? The gnomish leader seemed quite upset with the orcs. He went to great lengths to accuse them of stealing the gnomes' Patron rights before Earth's assimilation could be completed."

"Alright," I said somewhat perplexed. "That's *mildly* interesting, I admit, but still not worthy of much attention, especially considering everything else that has happened."

"Oh, I haven't gotten to the best part yet. Do you want to guess how *else* the gnomes have been readying humanity for Overworld? In the last few years, at least?"

"No, Eric, I don't want to guess," I growled. "Just spit it out."

"You're no fun, man," Eric lamented.

"Eric—"

Knowing me too well, my friend headed off my impending explosion before it began. "Alright, alright, I'll tell you. The gnomes haven't just altered our myths and legends, they have also influenced our gaming culture—or so they claim."

"What?" I asked, momentary anger forgotten.

Eric chuckled as he sensed my confusion. "You heard me right, buddy. According to the gnomes,