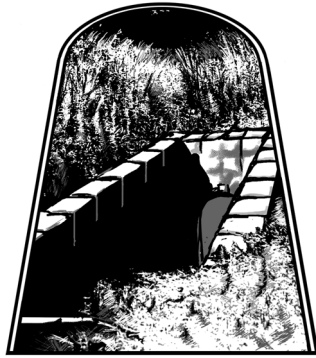


CHAPTER ONE



The Gape

“Only those beyond the caress of God can cross the Gape,” Hilliard had warned as he greedily clutched at his reward, a bottle of rye whiskey. When Gareth brushed the comment aside, Hilliard opened his prize and began to gulp greedily.

To Gareth, this had seemed like the rantings of a man busy drinking himself to death. Fortunately for him, Hilliard had known how to enter Dineothan and was willing to part with the information.

Now, as he approached the first real lead of his long search, the earth itself seemed determined to impede him. Soggy peat squelched beneath Gareth Solomon’s boot heels as he climbed the hillside leading away from the shore. Every step was a struggle. His gear rattled noisily each time he pulled his feet clear of the quagmire.

Behind him, tied to the rocky shoreline, was the

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sailing dory he'd rented from a fisherman earlier that morning. After hearing Gareth's destination, the elderly sailor charged him a hefty fee and frowned as if he'd never see his boat again.

Gareth had met many a seaman who refused his requests. No reasonable, god-fearing ship's captain would take him anywhere near Dineothan, it seemed. Sailors claimed that no amount of money would convince them to sail anywhere in the vicinity, that the waters themselves were cursed. Even without all of the superstitions, the near-impenetrable fog which bordered the isle on all sides forced sane men of the sea to steer clear.

Whether of sound mind or not, Gareth was no fool. Over the past few weeks, he'd heard so many tales that he knew making land at Dineothan would be a daunting task, especially for someone who lacked naval experience. Sailing the dory across the Gulf of Nina had proved challenging enough. Even now, as he trudged through the mud, he felt immense relief to be back on land.

Gareth found himself thinking about how he'd come to be at this diminutive bump in the gulf's waters. Hilliard had pointed him to the tiny island, Pilsu-kimah, no more than a few hundred yards from the larger island of Dineothan. He'd spoken of crewmen who'd entered the isle's catacombs, never to return. It was here that Gareth was supposed to find the pathway into the island nation.

His recollection of the last few weeks' events was,

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at best, spotty. Faces and locations swirled about in his head. His journey began with the need to find a cure; a plague running rampant through his home country had afflicted his family. Local doctors and men of science had discovered no remedy. Undaunted, he began a lengthy investigation. Each person he interviewed along the way only revealed a sliver of information. Even so, each one knew another who Gareth needed to meet, and so on. He was passed along from person to person for what felt like ages. Finally, he learned that the men who might know of a cure could be found in Dineothan.

Initially, he had brushed the suggestion aside. Dineothan was the stuff of folktales, the kind that no reasoning man took seriously. The island kingdom was allegedly surrounded by a mystical fog that separated it from the outside world.

A pagan healer from Boddenburn was the first to mention the island nation; he offered a rumor that the greatest minds of the known world could be found there. Its location, though, was unknown to him. He'd directed Gareth to an alchemist in the Golden City of Auewellian who might be better informed.

The more he dug around, though, the more convinced he became that his journey was worthwhile. The tales of Dineothan and its capital city, Upelstbohr, were the stuff of improbable folklore, but they were full of promise. Stories told of wise men, the greatest minds in all the lands, who resided within the metropolis of Upelstbohr. Concealed for decades behind the mysterious fog, they and their work were hidden from

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the world at large.

He'd undertaken the task not for gold, but for the sake of his loved ones, so he knew he couldn't turn it away from it. His family's needs were far more important than the doubts that haunted him. He couldn't sit around and watch them succumb to the disease.

After spending what felt like an eternity scouring the country for clues, plenty of which had been plain strange, he now scaled the sodden hillside hoping that something would stand at its crest.

The isle of Pilsu-kimah, legendary gateway to Dineothan, was a small cluster of bog-rich rocks that sat a stone's throw inside the mist. As Gareth had learned, it was not on any maps. Whether this was because of pervasive superstition or the desire to hide its location was something about which he did not care.

Gareth learned that his informant, Hilliard, once worked the gulf as a career fisherman. Rumor was that he'd sailed too close to Dineothan and found the small isle hidden on the outer edge of the mists. It was there that he and his men uncovered the underground catacombs that supposedly led to Dineothan. After some of his crew failed to escape its caverns, Hilliard returned home a haunted man. Now, he spent his time rambling incoherently while panhandling for his next drink. In the tiny slivers of sanity among his confusing words was the location of Pilsu-kimah. This revelation, though, came with a cryptic warning.

As he trudged upwards, Gareth patted at his torso and waist. There would be no turning back once he

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reached the summit.

He wore a boiled leather cuirass, over which draped a grey longcoat. Inside the jacket were stitched a number of pockets, stocked with items that could be used during a lengthy mission. Matches, chalk, and even a sack filled with smoked beef made up a part of his usual equipment.

Two belts wrapped across his waist. The first strap held a sextet of throwing knives. The second had loops for his limited supply of bullets. Hung from one end was the holster for his revolver. Within was tucked an oiled, black slab of steel that had a six-round chamber and cracked like thunder when fired.

Weathered cuisses, creased with wear, covered the upper thighs of his denim trousers. His steel-toed leather boots, soiled from previous journeys, were functional rather than decorative. Though occasionally something shiny and polished beckoned to him from a storefront, he resisted the lure. The soles of his practical footwear dug like canines into the rotten soil.

Slung across his back was his sword. The four-foot long blade lacked any ornamentation. It had been in his family for decades; however, except for a trio of nicks that intersected the fuller just above the hilt, it was an indistinct piece of steel. He'd not bothered to give the weapon a name. To him, it was merely a tool of his trade.

As Gareth continued his climb, he stumbled. Once again, he could feel the earth beneath him take hold of his foot. Even though the hike appeared short, the terrain tasked him with every stride.

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It was only once he approached the summit that the ground solidified. The soggy peat gave way to a dust-covered crag. While Gareth cautiously placed his feet, at least he no longer struggled.

It was there, at the top of the hill, that he spotted the entrance. For some reason, he'd expected to see some ancient structure, perhaps an abandoned mausoleum or derelict chapel. Maybe he'd let the stories go to his head.

Instead, it was a simple hole lined with pavers around the lip.

He walked to the edge and saw stairs descending steeply into the darkness below. Stone-laid walls propped up the surrounding soil. Though the steps were quickly swallowed up by the subterranean darkness, he managed to spot an ancient archway marking the entrance.

Although he remained alert, Gareth felt some degree of relief. All of his inquiries had led him to the strange structure before him.

As he lingered by the cavern's opening, Gareth looked at the dense mist that separated Dineothan from the outside world. No matter how hard he squinted, he could not see through the miasma. If there was a landmass large enough to hold a city there, he failed to spot even a hint of it. Except for the whispers of the wind, and the sounds of the gulf as it lapped against the shore, he heard nothing. If the so-called Grand City of Upelstbohr existed beyond the fog, it was still as the grave.

Gareth found himself momentarily entranced. Instead of formless whiteness, he saw something in

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the vapors. Hints of color faded in and out as the haze slowly roiled. Small glints, like reflective pieces of metal suspended in the air, caught his eye. For a second, he swore that he spotted movement: a glimpse of someone walking alone, hunched over and with an unsteady gait, weary from their trek.

Confused by the vision, Gareth blinked his eyes. He saw only the pallid mist.

Gareth shook his head and began his descent. He paused once he reached the archway and collected a scorched piece of wood in a nearby rust-coated sconce. The tip was wrapped in cloth that unfurled as he pulled the timber down. He produced a match and, after a strike on the adjacent wall, lit the torch. The flame was slow to catch, but, within a minute, it grew into a decent orange glow that wavered back and forth.

With the light in hand, he leaned forward to examine the ingress.

On each side of the entryway was a soapstone slab, covered in ancient lettering. Perhaps if he'd been anyone else, he might have paused. To Gareth, though, they were a column of uninteresting scratches that only had meaning to those more interested in the past than the present.

Perhaps the letters warned that the path before him wasn't entirely without peril. Even if he could decipher them, Gareth would have willfully ignored these words. He was outfitted and skilled enough to survive most anything. Years of living as a sellsword made him confident in his ability to adapt to any scenario. Even so,

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it wasn't as if he could turn back. For his family's sake, he needed to find the cure for their malady and no possible danger was going to turn him away.

He ducked his head and proceeded. At first, he took it slowly, but the stairs proved far more stable than they appeared.

Taking the steps two and three at a time, he continued to descend. How deep did this tunnel go? For a moment, he considered the depth of the surrounding waters. Certainly, whatever catacombs that connected Pilsu-kimah and Dineothan would reach well beneath the gulf's floor. If they didn't, his trip would be short.

He listened for the anticipated sounds of water but heard nothing.

Soon, Gareth noticed the change in atmosphere. The air itself grew heavy, as if the earth and water above threatened to crush him under their weight. More than once, Gareth slowed as he took a deep breath. He looked at the ceiling and was briefly relieved that it appeared well-constructed. Even though they were aged, only a few of the palm-sized tiles were missing. A few small shards littered the stone steps.

Once he reached the bottom of the stairs, he noticed fluid in the spaces between the earthen pavers. The gray stone walls were damp with a fine layer of condensation that clung to the surface. When he reached out to steady himself, drops formed and slowly rolled away from his hand.

As he continued his march forward, with torch in hand, the pathway dried. After a hundred yards, all that

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remained was the ambient moisture in the air.

The subterranean path was a lone corridor, just narrow enough to feel claustrophobic. Except for the burning piece of lumber in his hand, there was no light. There were no intersecting hallways or side rooms. He knocked on the walls, only to hear a dull thud in response.

As he progressed, he raised the torch. The ceiling was so low that the flames licked the paved tiles. A clump of roots poking out from an uneven opening quickly caught fire. It only took seconds for dampness to extinguish the blaze, which left a blackened husk in Gareth's wake. A thin wisp of smoke dissipated as Gareth passed through it.

Gareth continued to move along the tunnel. He only paused from time to time to catch his breath in the dense atmosphere. He often lingered long enough for the echoes of his own footfalls to die off. Eventually, though, a faint sound told him that he was not alone. There was something else there, moving in the distance. At first, he thought it was a shifting of the earth, but then the dull thuds sounded with increasing regularity.

The noise was consistent and deep, the beating of a heavy object against the cavern's supports. When he placed a hand on the nearby wall, he could feel the shudder, even through the coarse fabric of his glove.

He removed his sword from its scabbard and held it at his side.

As Gareth covered the next hundred yards, the pounding grew in intensity. He slowed as he tried to

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determine the source. Large mammals in battle, like elephants, came to mind. On the fields of Rutchgale, the Gherthans had draped their pachyderms in armor, adorned them with colorful banners, and deployed them in an effort to turn the tide of the conflict. Gareth considered himself lucky that he'd not been at the vanguard of that battle.

Even as the heavy sounds continued to vibrate the tunnel, Gareth pressed on. It wasn't until he caught a whiff of something foul that he stopped completely.

Gareth groaned as he placed the back of his free hand in front of his nose. In between the odors of wild animal and feces was an aroma of rotting meat. The rank fragrance seemed to permeate the still air.

He drew a long breath through his open mouth and sighed.

Just as suddenly as it had begun, the beating ceased. Gareth straightened. He wasted a few seconds waiting for something else to happen before he continued. The source of the noise was at least a point of reference, a destination he might reach. Without it, he was now alone in the darkness with no idea how much longer his trek would take.

Soon, he noticed a faint glow in the distance. He dismissed it as a trick of the light that played on his eyes. As he drew closer, the illumination became brighter. This emboldened Gareth, who hastened.

At the other end of the lengthy corridor was an archway, formed from soapstone blocks. Beyond lay a room lit by flickering flames.

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Both curious and wary, Gareth dropped his torch and snuffed it with the heel of his boot. He slowed to sneak up to the entryway. Gareth saw no reason to announce his presence.

With his back pressed against the doorframe, Gareth peeked into the chamber. The arena was dim, lit by flaming sconces along the upper rim. The circular room, which stretched at least 100 yards in diameter, was littered with piles of broken wood and stone slabs, the remains of tiered bleachers. A series of arched openings ran around the upper portion of the thirty-yard tall walls. The brick-laid floor, covered in dirt and debris, was recessed into the ground by a good four feet as it sloped downwards from the outer barricade.

Gareth looked in vain for an exit on the other side of the arena. A heap of what had once been a staircase was spread across the back side of the chamber.

Gareth ground his teeth as he let out a harsh breath through his nose. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up, and the pungent aroma in the air made his stomach churn.

Eventually, he shrugged his shoulders and continued. Just as he began to pass through the entryway, he spied the creature. He'd mistaken it for a blackened mass in the far left corner of the room, a clump of debris that had once been a part of the arena. When it shifted, Gareth recoiled. A low, guttural noise rumbled forth as it began to rise upward.

With a clumsiness borne from unwieldy weight, the beast clambered to its feet. Even hunched over as it was,

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the creature stood to a height of twenty feet. Beneath the coarse black hair that covered most of its torso was a dense grayish hide. The beast's arms were long and ended in meaty paws that curled into club-like fists of enormous size.

Between its hooved feet was a pile of picked-over carcasses. Gareth had no idea what the bodies once were. A few appeared fresh, which made him wonder where the beast found a consistent food source on isolated Dineothan.

He recoiled from the sight as he pressed his back against the doorway. The only stories of monsters he knew were old wives' tales, long ago dismissed. The burgeoning age of industry had proven all the ancient stories false. There were no more horrors lurking in the dark. Man was fiend enough.

Gareth had never seen anything like it before. Having spent decades in combat against soldiers and bandits, he had no clue how to deal with such an overlarge beast.

After a few seconds, Gareth returned his attention to the thing in the arena. He didn't want to die, but he couldn't retreat. His wife and daughter depended on him.

There had to be some other way through. The beast must have arrived there somehow. The hall behind Gareth was far too small for it.

Maybe I can sneak through. Use the debris as cover. If I can find an exit on the other side, make a break for it.

He nodded to himself.

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The only possible way is through, he solemnly thought as he clutched the hilt of his sword in both hands. Even as the beast's overpowering stench caused his nostrils to curl, he inhaled, spun on one heel and slunk into the chamber.

Gareth moved with cautious steps, keeping one eye on the creature. He drew breath through his nose. The flickering torches threw a pale amber light that cast long shadows, making it difficult to see all but the largest piles of debris. When a sliver of wood, no wider than a finger, crunched under Gareth's boot, his heart stopped.

His full attention went to the monstrosity, whose body shifted for a moment. When it stilled, Gareth's shoulders slumped. His pace picked up ever so slightly as he scurried behind a shattered pile of wooden bleachers. Once hidden in the jagged shadows, he ducked down. Gareth ran a hand over his face as he let out a sigh.

He was now a few dozen yards from where the creature waited, guarding its food. He still failed to spot any potential exit in the low light.

Just as Gareth was about to press on, with his gaze on the nearest pile of broken lumber, he noticed the beast move. It turned sideways and reached for something on the nearby ground. When it raised the object, Gareth saw it silhouetted: a club made from a fossilized tree trunk. Roots were now merely fractured stubs jutting from the end. Only a pair of splintered limbs remained attached to the converted weapon.

Gareth started to wonder. *It uses tools. Doesn't that*

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mean it has some kind of intelligence? Maybe it can be reasoned with. Maybe, no... no. I shouldn't even chance it. His gaze returned to the mass of picked-over bodies. Some appeared to be the remains of cattle. Others had more familiar shapes that gave him the shivers.

After spending a few seconds bolstering his courage, Gareth slipped out from behind his cover. He moved with measured steps as he gingerly crossed the distance. By the time he was a few yards into the open, the muscles along his shoulders had clenched tightly.

Without a sound, the beast turned towards him.

Gareth recoiled from the sight of the creature's face. Beneath the thick mane of dark fur was a visage out of nightmares. At first, he might have mistaken it for something like a lion, with an unhinged jaw that hung far lower than it should have. After a few seconds, though, Gareth realized that the facial structure was far too flat and long, as if it was some hybrid of a man and a predatory feline. Long and curved teeth, coated in gore from the recent meal, slowly moved up and down. Black eyes shimmered in the faint flickers of torchlight.

Gareth came to a sudden stop. Maybe, if he was fortunate, its vision would be like that of a toad's, based mainly on motion.

He was not lucky.

The beast hunkered down and let out a thunderous roar. The foul odor of rotten meat blew out of its mouth as a spray of spittle launched into the air. It stomped forward as it raised the cudgel.

"Shit," Gareth muttered as he launched to his right

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and rushed for cover. Though the creature remained on the periphery of his vision, Gareth focused on a slab of stone only yards ahead of him. Maybe it would do just well enough to put some space between himself and the beast. He could feel the pounding footfalls as they closed on him with surprising speed.

Another roar blasted his ears. Gareth realized it would catch him before he could reach shelter. Any hopes Gareth may have had about dodging the monster were immediately dashed.

The club came down with such swiftness that Gareth couldn't avoid the blow. Even as he attempted to sidestep to his right, the blunt tip glanced off of his left shoulder and spun him.

Gareth howled as he felt the bones in his shoulder break under the impact. His arm went limp. Only by clutching his left arm with his right hand did he manage to keep a grip on his sword. The tip dragged across the stone-laid floor for a moment with a high-pitched squeal.

Gareth was steady enough to stay on his feet. Though dazed for a second, it wasn't long until he reoriented himself.

This isn't a fight I can win, Gareth realized as he reached the broken chunk of stone that angled upwards into the air. He was able to cower beneath it for a moment as he tried in vain to assess his situation. As adrenaline surged, his heart pumped fiercely. While the pain in his shoulder screamed, his thoughts were racing far too fast to pay it any mind.

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Another roar sounded from only feet behind him. It was followed by a blow on his makeshift shelter. Chunks of rock rained down on him. Massive fingers reached around the far end and clutched the slab.

Gotta bail, Gareth realized as the creature peeled back the broken architecture. Even as the pain surged, he scurried out as the stone was pulled free and carelessly pitched aside.

After letting out a deep, rumbling howl that shook the air, the monster was hot on his heels. Frantic, Gareth was running for his life, hoping to locate an exit. His sword dangled impotently in his right hand.

As he dashed around another pile of broken masonry, Gareth spotted something in the distance. There it was—a darkened archway a dozen yards away, on the far side of the arena. As he struggled to increase his pace, Gareth kept his eyes on the exit that grew as he neared.

He paid no attention to the sound of something dense cutting through the air behind him.

The horizontal strike caught him across his back. Consciousness fled as Gareth flew headfirst into a nearby pile of shattered bleachers.