

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

ILONA ANDREWS



THE INHERITANCE

THE INHERITANCE

BREACH WARS

BOOK 1

ILONA ANDREWS

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CONTENT WARNINGS

This story is not a tornado that will rip your house apart. This is a well-maintained rollercoaster that passed all safety inspections with flying colors. It might be intense, but you will walk away from this ride. For those who like to know what's coming, here are the warnings before the drop:

Themes of romantic breakup and divorce, parental abandonment / family estrangement, violence including graphic scenes, mental health themes like panic attacks and anxiety, grief, harm to monster animals (the dog lives!), insects, arachnids.

LETTER TO THE READERS

This was not the plan.

That is to say that THE INHERITANCE was just supposed to be a fun short serial on the blog. A novella conceived to help, in our small way, anyone who's going through it. Right now things are pretty tough for many people. Traditionally, in times like these, we escape the daily stress through entertainment. Books, movies, TV shows. They become a lifeline, especially when they are serialized. Every new installment gives us something to look forward to.

At some point Ilona turned around in her chair and said, "Let's do a fun free novella for the blog." And I said, "How long are you thinking?" She said, "The schedule is already full, so short. Twenty-five thousand words?"

I laughed. Immediately. I'm laughing as I'm typing this. Because I knew that it would not be twenty-five thousand words. Later I heard her tell Jeaniene Frost about it, and I could hear her laughing through the phone. It's funny, because in her heart, Ilona honestly believed that it would be a short, simple, uncomplicated story. Whenever she says that about a new work, she is absolutely sincere. And it never ends up that way.

Long or short, I liked the idea, so we set about writing it.

Predictably, it kept getting deeper. We had to come up with a universal magic system. Different classes and talents. (We've included a list at the

end of the book.) Procedures for entering the breaches. Guild politics.

Writing something like this story immediately raises big questions. What would happen to all of us, individually and collectively in the aftermath of such a catastrophic global event? How would we all live in this new world? Would everything collapse into a post-apocalyptic hellscape, or would we find a way to fight back and keep on keeping on? Would we give up like Roger or persevere like Ada?

Ultimately, I believe the main theme of *THE INHERITANCE* is one of hope and love. Of people adapting to their new normal, horrific as it is, and not only surviving but becoming stronger.

Or maybe it's just a fun story about going into caves and killing monsters. That is up to you. Thank you for reading our story, and I hope you have fun.

Gordon Andrews

Yes, there is nothing more fun than having your husband and your best friend cackle at you in unison, and then you say, "No, I mean it," and they just laugh harder. Gordon is right. This was so not the plan, but it happened this way, and now *THE INHERITANCE* is a novel, and there will likely be one sequel. I give up.

Thank you for giving our work a chance. We appreciate it, and we hope you come to like Ada as much as we do.

Ilona Andrews

THE INHERITANCE

We are at war.

This war isn't about wealth, resources, or territory. It's a war of biological extermination. The very existence of humanity is at stake.

The moment the first gate burst, sending a horde of monsters to rage through our world, our future was changed forever. The invasion brought us unimaginable suffering, but it also awoke something slumbering deep within some of us, a means to repel and destroy our enemy. Powers beyond comprehension. Abilities that are legendary.

The war is ongoing. If you are a Talent, your country needs you. The world needs you. I can't assure you that it will be safe. I can't tell you that it will be easy. But I promise you that every gate we close means the difference between life and death for the people you love most.

Be the hero you always wanted to be.

Take my hand and answer the call.

Elias McFeron
Guildmaster of Cold Chaos

H *health insurance with a thousand-dollar maximum family deductible.*

Prescription drug coverage with an eighty percent discount off list prices.

The first time I heard about gates, I imagined them to be these portals glowing with a magical blue light. Too many video games, I guess. They were nothing like it. This one was a hole. A deep, black, vertical hole that punched through reality, swirling with pale mist. The tendrils of white smoke curled and slithered within it, but none escaped into our world.

The gate appeared in front of the Elmwood Park Rec Center eight days ago. To the left was Elmwood Public Library, all red brick and tinted windows. To the right was a funeral home followed by perfectly ordinary, three-story boxes of apartment buildings covered in tan stucco. Behind us, to the east, lay Chicago. And straight ahead was an interdimensional tear. Just another Monday.

If someone told me ten years ago that I would be standing in front of a hole leading into a dimensional breach filled with monsters and preparing to risk my life and go inside, I would've politely nodded, walked away, and later told Roger I'd met an unhinged person. Of course, a decade ago I was thirty, happily married, with a daughter in elementary school, a son just out

of diapers, and a low-risk private sector job I loved. A different life that belonged to a different Adaline.

The future looked bright back then. Until the invasion shattered it.

Free emergency medical care when injured in the line of duty.

I took this job for the benefits, and when it got to me, like now, I recited them in my head like a prayer.

Dental, a one hundred fifty-dollar deductible, fifty percent off braces.

Things that came with age and children: appreciation of the dental plan with orthodontics. Braces were hellishly expensive.

Vision plan, fifteen percent discount off glasses and contacts.

The gate gaped like a dark maw.

At least thirty-five yards tall. Maybe taller. The threat scale ran from blue to red, and the prep packet put this gate at the low-orange risk level. On a dying scale of one to ten, it was about seven.

This was my one hundred and sixty-eighth gate. I'd gone into orange gates many times before. I didn't want to go into this one. It made my hair stand on end. And the presence of the funeral home wasn't helping.

"Ominous sonovabitch, isn't he?" Melissa murmured next to me.

"Mhm."

The mining foreman crossed her arms on her chest. She was a tall woman, two years older than me, with auburn hair she religiously dyed every four weeks and the kind of face that said she had everything under control. We met years ago, on one of my earlier gate dives, bonded over kids, and stayed friendly ever since.

After the first gates burst, some people gained strange abilities that couldn't be explained by science. To be fair, science tried its hardest, but if it walked like magic and talked like magic, most people decided it was magic. These abilities were called talents, and to make things extra confusing, people who had them were also called Talents.

Talents fell into two broad categories: combat and noncombat. Combat Talents got a boost to physical prowess and developed abilities like forcefields, summoning energy weapons, or shooting fire from their fingertips. Noncombat Talents got a random skill that was useful only in specific circumstances.

Melissa was a noncombat Talent. She could sense ores. She had to be right on top of them and actively concentrate, but that talent, combined with her previous experience in iron mining, let her rise to the position of the Mining Team Foreman.

Melissa ran her mining crew like a well-oiled machine. She didn't get rattled, but she was staring at this gate like it was about to reach out and bite her. Something about this hole set both of us on edge.

Melissa narrowed her eyes. "Anja, tie your damn shoelaces."

One of the younger miners rolled her eyes and crouched. "Always on my case..."

"Exactly. I *am* always on your case. I'm on everyone's case. If we have to run for our lives out of that gate, I don't need any of you tripping over your feet, because I'll have to double back and get you. You have two toddlers to come home to."

"Yes, Mother."

Melissa heaved a sigh. "Everybody is full of sass today."

Around us the mining crew checked their gear, twelve people in indigo Magnaprene coveralls and matching hard hats. Nobody seemed unusually worried. Toolbelts were adjusted, rock drills and shears tested, the generator and floodlights on four industrial carts inspected. The usual.

The escort, five combat Talents in tactical armor, had done their precheck ages ago and were now waiting. Aaron, a bastion class fighter, sat on a crate, leaning against another crate, his eyes closed. His massive adamant-reinforced shield rested on the ground next to him. Three recon strikers mulled about, armed with SIG Spear rifles. They specialized in

ranged combat and rapid disengagement, which was tactical speak for shoot the shit out of everything and then run for the exit.

London, the escort unit leader, surveyed the mining crew. He was a blade warden, which meant he could both dish out lethal damage and summon a protective forcefield that made him invulnerable for two minutes. He carried a brutal-looking tactical axe, and on the few occasions I saw him use it, he cut through interdimensional monsters like he was chopping salad.

Both the mining crew and the escort wore indigo gear marked with the emblem of Cold Chaos, an upright sword wrapped in lightning in white on an indigo background. I wore a white hard hat and grey coveralls with a patch of the Dimensional Defense Command on my sleeve. The mining crew and the escorts were private contractors belonging to the Cold Chaos Guild, while I was a representative of the US Government. My official title was Dimension Breach Resource Assessor. The guilds called us DeBRAs, and they were supposed to keep us alive at all costs.

If things went to shit, Aaron would put himself between the mining crew and the threat, the strikers would shoot down whatever got past him, and London would grab me, wrap us both in his warden forcefield, and drag me out of the gate so I could report the disaster to the DDC. Of everyone here, I was the least expendable, as far as the government was concerned.

It didn't make me feel any better.

The mist swirled inside the hole, sending tendrils of dread toward me. I resisted the urge to hug myself.

Twenty days of recuperation leave. Which was long overdue. Maybe that was part of the problem.

Basic Housing Allowance.

Child Tuition Assistance.

CTA was the big one. It helped me cover tuition for Hino's Academy. Things were tight but I hadn't missed a payment yet. The school had stellar

academics, but I'd picked it for their underground shelter. If a gate ruptured and a flood of invading monsters washed over the city, Tia and Noah would be safe until the military and the guilds repelled it. Competition for the school was fierce, but since I was DDC, the kids were given special treatment, along with the children of guild members. Advertising that Hino was the school of choice for the children of Talents was good for the academy's prestige.

"Ada, London is checking you out again," Melissa said.

Next to me, Stella, Melissa's baby-faced protégé, snickered quietly. She was twenty, and flirting was still exciting.

A large German Shepherd sitting at Stella's feet panted as if laughing. Bear came from an illustrious line of police dogs with heroic careers. She had the typical GS coloring, big brown eyes, huge ears, and petting her was off-limits. I'd asked before and was told no. Bear was working like the rest of us. Petting would be distracting.

"Brace yourself, he's coming this way," Melissa murmured.

I turned. London was heading straight for us. His real name was Alex Wright, and he was from Liverpool, but everyone called him London anyway. People with combat talents were resistant to wear and tear, and at forty-five, London was still in his prime, tall, broad-shouldered, with blue eyes, wavy brown hair, and an easy smile. His job was to keep the miners and me safe, and since he was my designated babysitter, he and I spent a lot of time in close proximity. Even so, he'd been paying me too much attention lately.

London stopped by us. "Everything okay here?"

"Everything was fine until you showed up," Melissa said.

He grinned at her. "Just doing my due diligence."

They usually had a fun back-and-forth going. It put people at ease. I worked with guilds all over the Eastern US. In some mining crews, the

tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife and make a sandwich. Cold Chaos was light and bright.

Their bickering was amusing, but in reality, London was in charge. Melissa gave orders to the miners, but in the breach London had authority over everyone, me included. Disobeying his command meant endangering the entire team, and it wouldn't be tolerated. If London got a bad feeling, he could halt the entire operation and pull everyone out, and Melissa couldn't say a word about it.

"Are you worried about us, Escort Captain?" Stella tilted her head, and her mane of dark curly hair drooped to one side.

"It's my job to worry, Miles. Have you been doing your sprints?" London asked.

"I have," Stella told him. "Fifteen seconds for the dash."

A hundred meters in fifteen seconds was damn impressive. It was good to be young. God, I was twice her age. How the hell did that even happen? I was twenty only a few years ago, right?

"Not bad," London said.

"I can beat both of them," Stella reported, nodding at me and Melissa.

"Talk to me after you've pushed three human beings through your hips and put on forty pounds from the stress of keeping them alive," Melissa told her.

London turned to me. "Where do you dash, Ada?"

Why are you doing this? You know nothing will come of it. "Gate Park."

All government gate divers ran - not for distance or endurance - but to survive. A 100-meter sprint, a walking lap around the track, rinse and repeat for an hour, then go home, and take ibuprofen for the aching knees. Three times a week. Five would be better, but three was what I usually managed. The DDC had mandatory PT tests every six months to keep us in shape. When a noncombatant faced a threat in the breach, running to the gate was the best and often the only way to stay alive.

“Maybe I’ll join you sometime,” London said.

Again, why? “You’re out of my league. It would be a waste of your time.”

“Never,” he told me.

“How fast do you dash, Escort Captain?” Stella asked London.

“Let me put it to you this way: I could pick Ada up and give you a three-second head start, and you still wouldn’t beat my time.”

London smiled at us and moved on.

“Is he lying?” Stella asked Melissa.

“No,” the mining foreman told her. “Combat Talents are on another level. We can’t keep up.”

London was sending out all sorts of interested signals. He was nice to look at, charming, and he’d clearly been around the block enough to know what he was doing. By now, he’d had enough experience not to fumble and enough patience to pay attention when it mattered. If I agreed to go on a date, it would go smoothly and end well.

However, the DDC forbade fraternization with guild members. I was supposed to stay neutral and refrain from forming any personal attachments. Even the work-hours friendships like the one with Melissa were frowned upon. Getting involved with a guild Talent would get me fired, and I had two kids and a mortgage. As fun as London would be in bed – and he would be very fun – he wasn’t worth losing my job.

My phone vibrated. Hino Academy. *Please don’t be a problem, please don’t be a problem...*

“Yes?”

“*Ms. Moore?*”

Gina Murray, the assistant principal. That wasn’t good.

“*We have a problem.*”

Of course, we do.

A woman emerged from the gate and waved. A scout the assault team had left behind. An hour had passed without incident, and it was time to go in.

“Alright people!” London called out. “You know the drill. Last gear check. Move out in two minutes.”

“What happened?”

I needed to fix this fast. Phones didn’t work inside the gate. There was no connection, and if you tried to take a picture or record audio, you only got static. London had to stick to schedule and account for any delay. If we went inside five minutes late and a disaster struck, even if it was completely unrelated, the Guild would drag him over hot coals for it.

“Tia left campus without permission.”

Melissa rolled her eyes.

“Okay.” *What was that kid doing...*

“Before she left, several students and a member of the faculty heard her make a self-harm threat.”

“What?”

“We are required to contact the police...”

“Please don’t do anything. Let me speak to her first. I’ll call you right back!”

I ended the call and stabbed Tia’s number in my contacts.

Beep.

She wouldn’t. Tia wouldn’t. Not in a million years.

Beep.

Beep.

I knew my kid. She would not.

“Yes, mom?”

“Are you going to hurt yourself?”

“What?”

The mining crew formed up in front of the gate. London gave me a pointed stare.

“Oh look, Stella’s dog is malfunctioning,” Melissa said too loudly.

Stella pretended to shake Bear’s leash. “Won’t turn on. Something broke.”

London headed for us.

“The Academy called. You told them you were going to hurt yourself and left campus.”

“Well, you know what, maybe I should kill myself because they just assigned us a fifth essay due next week...”

“Tia!” I couldn’t keep the pressure from vibrating in my voice. “This is really serious. I need you to be honest with me. Are you thinking of hurting yourself?”

London cleared the distance between us. “What’s the hold up?” he asked quietly.

“Give her a minute,” Melissa told him. “It’s her daughter.”

“No. I was in the cafeteria, I failed Latin again, and then there was the fifth essay due...”

London met my gaze. “Three minutes.”

Thank you, I mouthed. Three minutes was a gift.

“...Mr. Walton made a snide comment about not applying myself and I said, ‘Just kill me, it will solve all my problems...’”

And...?

“...And then I went to get Starbucks! I always sneak out to get Starbucks. Everybody does it. Nobody cares!”

It wasn’t a real threat. Someone overreacted. The relief washed over me like an icy flood. Not a real threat.

“Mr. Walton hates me!”

“Tia, I’m about to go into the gate. The school wants to call the cops.”

“What? Why?!”

“If this happens, things will get very complicated, and I can’t help, because I’ll be inside the breach. I need you to return to school and fix this.”

“I was already on my way! I’m almost there.”

I started toward the gate.

“I’m walking into the school building right now.”

“Kiss their ass, do whatever you need to, but make sure you fix it. I love you.”

“I love you too. Mom...”

The gate loomed.

“Here we go,” Melissa muttered.

“I have to go, Tia.”

“Mom!”

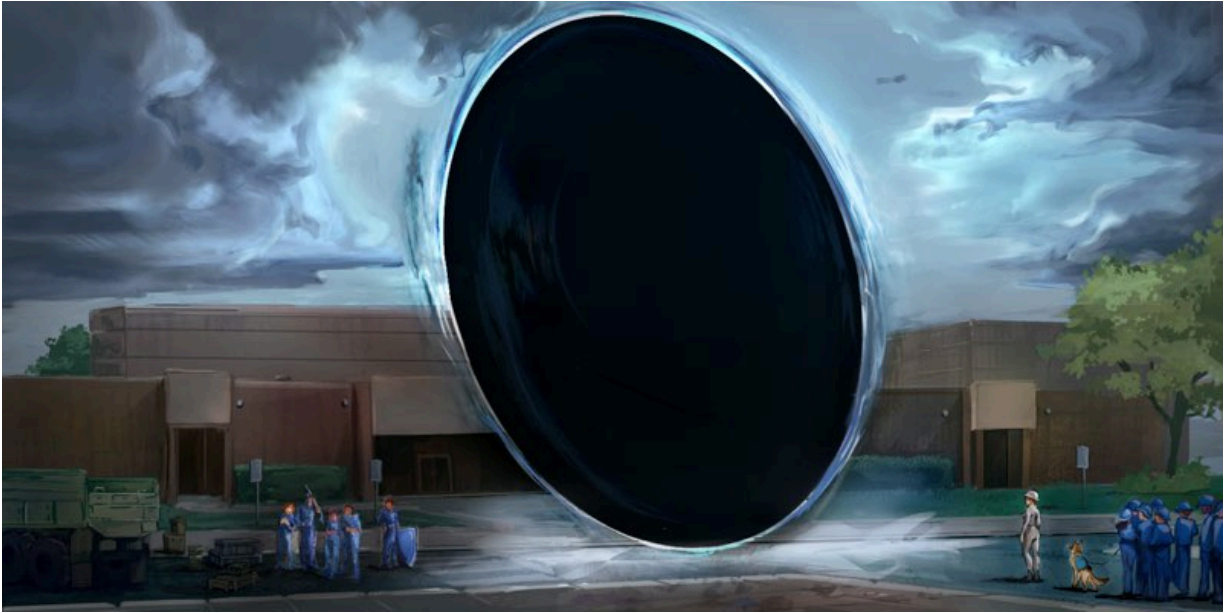
“Yes?”

“Don’t die!”

“I won’t,” I promised. I hung up, powered the phone off, and slipped it into the zippered pocket of my coveralls.

“Remember,” London called out. “We go in together as one, we come out together as one. Nobody gets left behind.”

The mist swirled in front of us, held back by an invisible boundary. I took a deep breath and stepped into the dark.



STEPPING THROUGH THE GATE FELT LIKE TRYING TO PUSH YOUR WAY through dense, rubber-thick Jello.

I blinked, trying to adjust to the low light.

A stone passage stretched in front of me, illuminated by patches of bioluminescent lichens, moss, and fungi. They climbed up the walls, glowing with turquoise, green, and lavender, some curling like fern sprouts, others spreading in a net like bridal veil stinkhorn mushrooms.

The otherness slapped you in the face. It didn't look familiar, it didn't smell right, and it didn't feel like home. The hair on the back of my neck rose. Fear dashed down my arms like hot electric needles. I wanted out of this gate. The urge to turn around and run back to the familiar blue sky was overwhelming.

This burst of panic used to happen every time I entered a breach. I'd tried everything in the beginning: counseling, breathing, counting, cataloging random things I saw... My primary prescribed some Xanax, which I couldn't take because it was strictly off limits for gate divers. Slowed the reaction time down too much.

Medication wouldn't have worked anyway. Nothing had worked until one week we got a cluster breach. Four gates opened simultaneously in close proximity, and I was the only DeBRA in range. I went through four breaches in forty-eight hours, and by the middle of the third my panic switch got permanently broken. This anxiety was an unwelcome blast from the past, and it needed to go away right now.

It was probably residual stress from the school call.

"Alright," Melissa called out. "We have a limestone cave biome. The assault team found a large chamber with promising mineral deposits, so we have a nice short hike ahead of us. Watch your step. Do you remember how Sanders fell into a crevice and got stuck, and we spent ten minutes pulling him out while he was farting up a storm and giggling? Don't be Sanders."

Sanders, a tall bear of a man in his mid-thirties, chuckled into his reddish beard. "I didn't have chili this time, I swear!"

A light laughter rippled through the crew. Melissa was going right down her playbook: item one, put everyone at ease the moment the crew stepped into the breach; item two, reach the mining site; item three, profit.

"We have Adaline Moore with us this morning. She is the strongest DeBRA in the region, which means if there is good pay in this hellhole, she will find it for us," Melissa announced. "Another day, another dollar. Isn't that right, Assessor Moore?"

"That's right." I matched her tone. "Living the dream."

Another ripple of laughter.

"Once more..." one of the miners called out.

"Don't you say it!" Melissa growled. "You know better!"

"...into the breach!"

"Damn it, Hotchkins!"

The actual quote was "unto the breach," but it had mutated long ago. Guild superstition held that if you said the line just as you entered the

breach, you would come out alive, but you would kiss the chance of a big score goodbye. It didn't matter. Someone always said the line.

"I swear if you jinxed us, I will fire you myself..." Melissa carried on.

Aaron looked at London. The blade warden nodded, and the massive tank started down the passageway, moving fast. Time was money. The mining crew followed, keeping the four equipment carts in the middle, the strikers guarding the flanks like border collies obsessed with their herd.

I joined the flow of people. Melissa and Stella walked behind me and London on my right. Elena, the assault team's scout who'd come back to escort the miners, fell in step next to London. Lean, with a harsh face and blond hair pulled into a tight ponytail, Elena didn't walk, she glided.

In theory, being on the mining crew was the safest part of the gate dive. Safe was a relative term. Walking across a narrow beam over molten lava was also safe, as long as you didn't fall.

"Doing okay?" London murmured.

"Yes," I lied.

"Is Tia alright?"

"Yes. She's a smart kid. She will handle it. Thank you for the three minutes."

"You're welcome." He glanced at me, his eyes concerned. "Not feeling this one?"

"No."

Gate divers were like ancient sailors. We ventured into the unknown that could kill us at any moment. In the breach, survival depended on luck and intuition, and our rituals were an acknowledgment of that. We knocked on wood, we muttered lucky sayings under our breath, and we trusted our instincts. My instincts were pumping out all of the dread they could muster.

"Anything specific?" London asked.

"It makes my skin crawl."

“Don’t worry,” he promised quietly. “I’ll get you out of here in one piece.”

I glanced at him.

“I mean it, Ada. The only way you go down is if I’m down, and I’m really good at surviving. We get in, get out, and you can go home and sort the kid issues out. Tomorrow will be like this never happened.”

“Thank you.”

He nodded.

Ten years had passed since Roger had abandoned us. I’d been on my own for a decade, taking care of the kids, paying the bills, surviving. Every decision in my life was up to me, and I made them without support or help from anyone else. I’d become used to it, but London just reminded me how it felt to share all of that with someone. Someone who cared if you lived or died.

This was the worst moment to wonder about things. I promised my daughter I would come back. I had to concentrate on that.

The passageway forked. We turned right. Hotchkins, a short, dark-haired man, spraypainted a backward orange arrow on the wall. He would do this every time we made a turn. It was a proven fact that people running for their lives had trouble orienting themselves.

Ahead a glowing stick shone among the rocks. Beyond it eight furry bodies sprawled on the ground in a puddle of blood. My foot slid on something. A spent shell casing. The cave floor was littered with them. The assault team had made a stand here.

We passed the bodies, skirting them to the sides. The dead things were large, about the size of a Great Dane, with long lupine jaws and massive feet armed with hook-like claws. Their pelts, chewed up by bullets, were shaggy with blue-grey fur. They didn’t look like anything our planet could’ve spawned.

“A variant of Calloway’s stalkers,” London said. His voice was perfectly calm.

“Yeah. There were a lot of them, and they are spongy. They soak up bullets like they’re nothing and keep coming,” Elena said. “And they spit acidic bile.”

“Good to know,” London said.

“We did our best to clean up, but the place is a maze.” Elena kept her voice low. “Passages going everywhere, so we may run into some. We didn’t see anything more dangerous until we went much deeper, so there is that.”

“No worries,” Stella offered from behind them. “Bear will let us know if anything is coming.”

Elena gave her a cold smile. “*I* will let us know if anything is coming.”

“Don’t pay her any attention, Bear,” Stella murmured. “She didn’t mean anything by it.”

Bear twitched her right ear. One day I would pet that dog.

Elena kept gliding forward, her face portraying all of the warmth of an iceberg.

A lot of combat Talents developed similar abilities, so many that the government began to classify them. Tank classes, like London’s blade warden or Aaron’s bastion, had a lot of defensive skills, so they drew the attention of the enemy and absorbed damage. Damage dealers, like strikers or pulse carvers, attacked the target, causing rapid destruction.

Elena was a pathfinder, a scout class that came with heightened hearing and vision, upgraded speed, and an unerring sense of direction. If she concentrated hard enough, she could hear a person murmuring behind a closed door two floors above her. But as awesome as Elena was, I would trust Bear over her any day. There was a reason every guild brought canines into the breaches. The transdimensional monstrosities wigged them out, and

they let us know when something came near. Dogs were the best early warning system we had.

The cave passage kept branching. Left, left, right, another right, each tunnel glowing with swirls of colorful lichens and fungi. Elena was right, the place was a maze. At least we didn't have that far to go. I had seen the preliminary survey of the breach, and the mining site was half-a-mile from the entrance, off to the side.

The way was clear, the tunnels were empty, and Bear stayed quiet. Just like any other gate dive. It should've felt routine, but it didn't. I kept expecting some kind of awful shoe to drop.

Ten years ago, when the first set of gates appeared out of nowhere near the major population centers, they'd taken humanity by surprise. We'd cordoned them off so we could carefully study them and before anyone had a chance to adjust, the gates burst, spilling a horde of monsters into the world.

We knew a lot more about the gates now. Beyond every gate lay the breach, a miniature dimension stuffed to the brim with creatures so dangerous, they were biological weapons rather than living beings. That dimension connected Earth and the hostile world like a gangplank linking two ships. The breaches were how the enemy got from their world to ours.

Every breach had an anchor, a core that stabilized it. Once the breach appeared, the anchor began to accumulate energy. When it got enough, the gate would burn through the fabric of our reality and rip open, releasing the monsters into our world to rampage and murder everything they came across. The more dangerous the breach was, the longer it took to burst.

There was a brief period, anywhere from a few days to a few months from the moment the gate appeared, when the monsters couldn't escape yet, but we could enter the gate from our side. It gave us a chance to extinguish the anchor and collapse the breach. The moment a gate manifested, the clock started ticking.

At first, destroying the anchors was the sole responsibility of the military, but it quickly got prohibitively expensive. Regular humans were no match for the breach beasts, and casualties were high. And it was discovered that the breaches contained a wealth of materials: strange ores, medicinal plants, and monster bones with incredible properties. Resources that could aid our fight and make us stronger. It wasn't just about destroying the anchors anymore. We had to strip the breach of anything valuable before it collapsed.

Within months after the first Talents manifested their abilities, they banded into guilds, and governments around the world began to outsource gates to them, taking a percentage of the profits. Economic and security crisis solved at the cost of volunteer lives.

By now, the process of gate diving was almost routine. As soon as a gate appeared, it was graded, its threat level measured, a government assessor like me assigned, and the appropriate guild contacted. The guild sent a team in to do a preliminary survey and let the DDC know when they were ready to proceed, at which point I arrived at the site.

The attack began with the assault team, heavy hitters with combat talents, who entered the gate and cut and burned through the miniature pocket dimension until they found the anchor and destroyed it. The journey to the anchor took days, sometimes weeks.

While the assault team worked their way to the anchor, the mining crew came in and stripped the breach bare, extracting anything that could be of use and would help humanity keep fighting. Each breach's resources were unique and precious. My job was to assess the space, guide the mining team, and make sure that the government got their thirty percent cut.

Once the anchor was destroyed, the assault team would rush back to the exit, because without the anchor, the gate would collapse in three days. Nobody knew what happened to the breaches once the gate closed.

Hopefully everybody got out before the gate vanished, and when the next one appeared, we would do it all over again.

Ahead Aaron stopped. Finally. It was time to earn my paycheck. The sooner I found something of value, the sooner we all got out of here.

Apprehension curled around me like a cold snake. I could just turn around and run back to the gate, quit, and never go into any breaches again. I could absolutely do that. But then whatever this breach held would stay in it instead of becoming weapons, armor, and medicine.

I took a deep breath and pushed forward, past the miners, to do my job.