

A FANTASTIC DISCOVERY

All Shanzay wanted was for someone to care. Sitting behind a microphone at the back of a bustling coffee shop, she read passionately from the open notebook cradled in her hands. When she finished the last stanza of her poem, she looked up hopefully and held her breath.

A row of chairs and a few tables faced the small stage, but only two of the seats were occupied: the man in the center scrolled through his phone impassively, and the woman to her right slumped forward with her head on a table, snoring softly. Shanzay let out her breath. She forced a smile, slapped her notebook shut, and hurried off the stage.

The air outside the building was heavy: rain was coming. Shanzay quickened her pace as she stepped into the alleyway, head craned while she scratched out a line in her note-

book and scribbled something new below it. But just then, something ahead caught her eye. Strange, faintly glowing tendrils of rainbow-colored light drifted over the ground and moved slowly toward her feet. She came to a stop and looked around for another witness to this oddity, but the alleyway was empty.

Shanzay swallowed hard. Now that she had a good look at it, she could see bright lines of light that formed a star-like shape—four points, with the top point extended longer than the rest. A series of more circular lines surrounded the star and glowed with a warm light, as if inviting her forward. Before her mind could catch up with her body, Shanzay took a bold step forward into the symbol.

Then the world went white.





Shanzay blinked her eyes open, and after a few moments, everything came into focus. Below her was a much larger version of the symbol she'd stepped into, only this one was engraved on the floor and pulsed with the same multi-colored light. Her eyes moved up and scanned the wide walls around her, marveling at the huge murals depicting construction, conflict, and destruction (or, at least, that's what it looked like to her). And dividing these images were several massive pillars that stretched several stories above her—a fitting monument to this cavernous room.



“Come on in—there’s lots to explore.”



A soft glow pulled Shanzay's attention back to the floor. A single, curving line at her feet grew brighter, seemed to wiggle just a bit, then shot toward an archway across the room. After a dozen or so hurried steps, she emerged into an even larger room, where she was surprised to see two other people: one broad-shouldered with a bronze gauntlet on his forearm, and the other, slender with what looked like a metal guitar slung over his shoulder.

She barely had time to wave hello when the enormous contraption in the center of the room whirred to life. An aperture at the top of the ceiling dilated, revealing a swirling nebula of stars in the sky above. Suddenly, a stream of sparkling light poured down, tumbling through the concentric metal rings and splitting to illuminate several large, translucent orbs. One of these smaller light streams arced toward

a doorway on the opposite side of the contraption, and at the same time, the glowing line on the floor below Shanzay pulsed excitedly before shooting toward the room. Shanzay hurried to catch up.

Once inside the doorway, her eyes widened as she saw a slightly smaller version of the pillared room that welcomed her into this place. The stream of sparkling star light above ricocheted around another device, then shot down onto a large book in the center of the room. Something leaned against the lectern holding up the book, but she couldn't quite make it out at this distance. She hesitated inside the archway, but the glowing light pulsed encouragingly at her feet and then sped to the center of the room. Shanzay bit her lip, then followed.



She approached the book slowly, unsure of what the stream of star light would do to her if she got too close. Nothing happened, so with a single bold step, Shanzay reached the book and lifted the staff-like object that rested there. It came alive in her hands and somehow pointed her attention to the pillar of light.

Then something truly wondrous happened. Through a process she couldn't quite grasp, Shanzay made an image appear on the page. It was clearly Hercules, but he looked . . . different. When the stream of light stopped, the device in her hands grew warm,—like she was cradling a cup of tea. She paused for a moment, and while she couldn't explain why she did it, she made a quick gesture with the device. Suddenly, in a blaze of dazzling light, Hercules leapt from the page onto the floor beside her.

The hero gazed wide-eyed at his incredible new armor as it glinted in the room's light. With a lopsided grin, he bowed his head slightly at Shanzay in gratitude for the unexpected gift. Another whirring sound from above drew her attention, and a new stream of star light poured onto the book. Shanzay turned back to its open pages, and when she began to imagine what else she could bring into this realm, a grin tugged at her lips. Forget about coffee shops—this was the stage she was meant for.

