

- 3 -

THE COTTAGE

MICAH SLAMMED THE DOOR SHUT TO HIS BEDROOM WITH an enthusiasm that startled even himself. He locked it, sealing off the world he knew from the forbidden one he yearned to understand. Eyes wide, heart hammering in his chest, Micah took hesitant steps toward the mirror. He raised his hand and touched the cool, solid, unyielding glass.

“Just a dream,” a tinge of bitterness clouded his voice as he began to turn away.

And then, he heard the faintest hum of a melody. The sound hung in the air, tantalizingly close yet leagues away. Micah’s head snapped back toward the mirror. The surface had come alive, undulating like a tranquil pond disturbed by a solitary drop. His heart pounded so loudly he thought it might burst out of his chest. It was no dream; it was a summons, an irrefutable call to something greater. With a mix of exhilaration and trepidation, Micah reached out his hand.

The sensation of hurtling through an unseen dimension halted, replaced by the touch of solid ground beneath him. Micah’s feet stumbled on landing, sending him tumbling into a lush carpet

of wildflowers. The colors swirled into a dizzying spiral as he lay there, catching his breath and waiting for the world to regain its focus. He sat up, clutching his stomach before lurching forward and throwing up in the tall grass next to him. With a groan, he held his head for a moment, and then, from the periphery of his vision, he noticed a figure casually reclined on a nearby boulder. Ryuji jumped down and strolled over, a playful smile gracing his lips as he waved.

“Tasura Micah-na,” Ryuji’s accent almost made Micah swoon as he accepted his hand to rise to his feet. Ryuji offered him a flask of water from his belt, which Micah quickly took, tilting it over his face with precision to rinse his mouth.

“Thank you.” Micah wiped his face with his wrist and handed the flask back.

Ryuji nodded and retrieved the necklace, carefully draping it around Micah’s neck.

“Is this... is this a dream? Are you...” Micah paused.

“It is real,” Ryuji laughed. “Do citizens of your world not travel to other realms?”

“Mm... not like this.” Micah gave a casual shrug, his mind drifting back to his college days when Shyla convinced him to explore psychedelics at a house party.

With a gesturing nod, Ryuji turned, inviting Micah to follow. His figure moved effortlessly through the forest, a natural part of the landscape yet distinctly apart from it. Micah hesitated for just a heartbeat, still reeling from the juxtaposition of worlds, from office cubicles to mythical forests in a mere moment. Then, with a steadying breath, he followed, stepping deeper into the enigma that was Song Crye and the intoxicating pull of his new friend.

"The Shadowbearer's Curse" **by Jasmyn Morning**

Available: September 23, 2024

Pre-Order Today!