

A girl sits at the rock. It is a peaceful spring day. Quiet bird calls, whispering rustles of wind in the leaves of marvelously tall trees, trickling water in a stream, air that smells of rain and water and the past, the soft sound of boots treading through mud and leaves and grass and all of the wonderful things in spring. Yet the girl, she does not fit. The scene is turned from lovely to obscure by this intruder, this alien, this evil spirit that stirs the calm of the spring breeze and awakens the resting beasts of the forest. Her blonde hair and freckles are her only features that fit into this beautiful intricate puzzle of seasons and time created by the crazy universe. Her freckles are like the flecks of dirt flung up by the rain on to the tree roots, the leaves, the rocks, the sky, and everything above it. Her hair is like a child to the sun in the sky, whose light shines down to the forest floor through the gaps in the leaves. Her fingers dance across the moss beside her, moving as if the forest floor is her piano and the leaves in the trees her sheet music. The entire forest seems to be leaning in towards this girl, listening for the melody that cannot be heard by anyone but herself. Yet the forest is still reluctant to listen for her hidden melody, for she is the one that disturbs every mind and soul within the forest. Hidden dangers could be lurking in the shadows of this mysterious girl, the girl that is half of the last puzzle piece.

The door is pushed open and the girl slips in, slender and quiet like a mouse in the dark of night. Her legs are speckled with the dirt of spring, similar to the freckles on her face. She swiftly shuts the door behind her, as if to keep the unwanted things out of her peaceful den. Her sunshine hair sways back and forth, filled with scents of afternoon rain, fresh grasses, and the damp undergrowth of the forest. A quiet smile plays at her lips, a reminiscence of memories that have blended into one indefinable, wonderful blur. But hiding in the grey-blue waters of her eyes is a single worry, a hint of fear, a significant concept that can never be forgotten until it is resolved. The girl longs to be a part of this forest, the trees, the whispering leaves, the damp earth, the tangled roots, the rotting leaves, the bird cries. She longs to be a part of this still, harmonious world in which they live in. She has given everything she can to the forest; she has given everything she has. But the forest is stubborn, and even after all she

has done, it will not accept her. All she wants is to be the last piece to complete the elaborate puzzle of the forest.

The den is a hiding place, an escape, and an imperfect paradise. A different world made of fresh air, refreshing shadows, the rain, the trees, and everything that matters in the girl's mind. Tall trees surround the rotting cabin like quiet guardians, forever loyal and never unwelcoming. The rotting wood and growing fungus never bothers the girl. The fungus is a highly developed kingdom with its mushroom citizens, mushroom houses, and moss fields. The roof of the cabin is tall and sturdy, with several holes created by the storms of the past. The sunlight creeps through gaps in the wood and illuminates the Mushroom City. Unlike the forest, this place accepts her, although she is a disturbance, an unbalanced being that unsettles almost all. Her only allies are the guardian trees, the friendly old cabin, and its impenetrable kingdom of fungus.

The sound of large clumsy footsteps awakens the girl from her empty, dreamless sleep. Outside, the forest is awake, watching, waiting. She stands up, brushing her hair back with her fingers and attempting to hold in a yawn as she glances around at the dark cabin, bathing in the incomplete silence of night. The mushroom city is asleep; all of its citizens dreaming of whatever mushroom people dream of, the buildings resemble statues in an abandoned desert. The wood on her bare feet is cold and damp as she silently approaches the door of the cabin. Through the frame of the door, she sees a figure of a large creature.

On the moonlit path of her cabin stands a beast. Nearly as tall as the cabin, its figure casts a long shadow on to the damp forest ground. The paws of this beast are as big as the flat rocks that rest on the riverbed of the shallow creek, his legs as thick as the eternally growing trees that guard the forest. His skin is a thick coat of moss, leaves twigs, and bark, with the occasional sprouting of mushrooms. His eyes hide deep in a cave below his brow bone, glistening in the moonlight like 2 lively beetles. This beast is a creation of the fluttering leaves, the soft moss, the flowing water, the damp undergrowth, and the very soul of the forest. He stands on all fours and faces the girl, surrounded by a sense of unconventional wisdom. His thick matted mane gently dances in the light spring

breeze, and as he opens his mouth to speak, hundreds of small yellowed teeth are revealed in his extraordinarily large mouth.

“What happens next. You don’t belong here, but you can’t leave now. The roots of your mind have buried themselves deep in to the ground, intertwining with the roots of the trees of the forest. You have found what you need, but somehow you are still lost,” a deep voice murmurs these words as if they have been rehearsed a thousand times. The girl says nothing, hair hanging over her face like a curtain to protect her from the words she does not want to hear.

“What happens next,” he says again, the words sounding more like a statement than a question. Somewhere in the distance, a glass cup shatters.

“What happens next,” he repeats. The girl holds her slender hands over her ears and clenches her eyes shut. Somewhere in the distance, a window shatters.

“What happens next,” he says one last time, his voice warped and twisted. His face is melting, dripping to the forest floor. His body melts to the ground, once again a part of the forest. The distant sound of a window shattering. The floor is shaking, along with the trees, the cabin and the stars in the sky. The world is vibrating, like one big guitar string, plucked by the universe. The girl crouches to the ground, burying her face in to her knees. The cabin crumbles to the ground, the trees are piles of rubble and lost bits of memories, the kingdom of the forest crumbles down in front of the girl’s eyes. The roots of her mind are brutally yanked from the ground, and she sits on the vibrating ground, waiting for it to end, waiting for everything to end, waiting to stand up and see the forest ruins, waiting to stand up and see the ruins of her mind. Where is the forest? Where is my mind? Is this real? Am I doing this? She asks her self. Shaking, everything is shaking. The distant sound of a shattering window. A thin crack appears in the black painted sky. Like a disease, the cracks spread, crawling between the stars and around the moon. A deep empty chasm is forming across the sky, small crevices surrounding it like a network of tree roots in the ground.

In one fatal swoop, the sky shatters into a million shards of glass. The stars, planets, and the sky falls to the ground like a million glowing raindrops,

watering the ruins of the forest and the ruins of her mind. Shards of glass skim past her arms, leaving straight red lines, like the trail of a shooting star. The sky is lodged in her flesh, the stars glow on her skin. She created this world as an escape from reality, and now she is destroying it. Somewhere deep in her mind, she knows that it is time to go. This beautiful storm is her bitter language. And as the shards of sky water the vast ruins of the forest, a new world grows. A world of towering skyscrapers, smelly streets, polluted air, unfriendly faces, beggars on the sidewalks, sparkling advertisement signs, crowded coffee shops, bright lights, and dirty loud trains.

Walls grow around the girl, shining unnaturally white and bringing her a sense of unfamiliar formality. A roof forms over her head, just as white as the walls, blocking the blank scenery above. The empty starless sky beyond the painted sky of her painted world disappears as the ceiling solidifies. She is crouching on a cold white marble floor. Her hands skim over the ground, and as she stands, her face is filled with terror, pale and scared. Her mouth hangs open and her eyes are red and bloodshot, each thin vein visible from a distance. The bags under her eyes look as if they have been drawn on. The cuts and scrapes from the shards of glass have mysteriously disappeared. Hair hanging over her face, she looks like a small mouse that has just barely escaped the grasp of a hungry cat. Her legs are slightly dysfunctional, due to the long period of crouching. She turns to look at this room to which she has been mysteriously transported to.

Everything is an unnatural white, illuminated by a white lamp standing silently in the corner. The room smells of freshly washed clothes, and smooth white sheets stretch across a bed in the middle of the room.

Her forest has disappeared, her precious cabin, the only things she cares about, the only world she wants to live in. It has been replaced by this place, this horrid city, this room of shining white walls and furniture. She stumbles toward the bed and stares vacantly at the cold, white ground.

Where has the forest gone? She asks silently in her mind. Her mind somehow feels less reliable, no longer a trustworthy friend that is always there.

Sitting silently on the bed, it occurs to her that maybe this is a nightmare. This world is much too strange for reality. Yes, that's it. She repeatedly convinces herself that she will soon wake in to the real world.

The girl looks like a tired lifeless doll, sitting limply on the bright white bed. It seems as if at any moment she will slump over on to the floor.

Tap, tap. There is a light knocking on the wall, reminding her of rain pattering on to the roof of her cabin. It takes her a moment to snap out of her trance. She perks up, proving that she is not an old doll, but a tired human. A door opens to the right of her, something that her keen eyes had failed to notice, because everything is a plain, bright, white. A man slips through the door, quiet as the night. He is wearing a long white jacket, and a thick black pair of glasses rest on his wide nose. His dark brown hair is ruffled and untamed, looking as if he has just woken up from a restless night of sleep. Wrinkles crawl across his face as he says,

“Hello Sarah. I see that you have woken up. We have been waiting.”

And everything comes back to Sarah, everything that she wanted to forget.