

## Chapter 2

“Don’t forget to leave a note. Don’t forget to leave a note. DON’T forget it, Chris!” I repeated aloud.

I fumbled through my bag and pulled out a folded sheet of paper, smoothing it against the steering wheel. A rough map of the trail. My planned campsite circled twice.

Last time, I hadn’t prepared anything.

I winced at the memory.

That trip had been a mess, too many forgotten basics, too many close calls I didn’t want to think about it too hard. This time was different. It had to be.

“I’ve got it this time,” I said.

I let my mom and friends know where I was going, and how long I’d be gone. I had made my decision, two nights. That’s it.

Their faces flashed in my mind...nervous smiles, deeply concerned eyes but I reassured them I’d be careful.

I folded the note again, slower this time, then set it carefully on the dashboard.

“I’m fine,” I said, a little quieter.

Soon enough I would be alone on the trail. Days from help, food, or the nearest city.

I shifted in my seat, gripping the wheel a little tighter than I needed to. This was my first trip out here by myself, and the thought kept invading my head no matter how many times I tried to shake it.

In preparation, I had spent weeks flipping through wilderness camping books from the school library. One tip stuck with me though. Before your trip, leave a note.

I reached over and adjusted the paper again, making sure it wouldn’t slide.

*Relax, Chris. You’re not going to get lost. Just another weekend trip in the forest. It’ll be fun.*

I drew in a slow breath of the clear fresh mountain air, closed my eyes for a moment, and let it out.

I opened them again and sat up turning my thoughts on the scenery. The road stretched ahead, winding through a lush green spring forest. Aspens lined the roadside like a white picket fence, their pale trunks standing guard over the fresh pine saplings behind them. The sky was clear and bright with early summer heat still. Everything seemed just perfect, but a feeling of something missing was still there.

My stomach growled.

The outdoor supply store had been picked clean. All that was left were two packs of dehydrated spaghetti sitting on my passenger seat.

No pad Thai. No bison chili. Just spaghetti.

I let out a small sigh. Usually I liked having one good meal on the trail, you know something to look forward to at the end of the day.

Maybe I could find some mushrooms to go with it.

I perked up in my seat a little more and pressed down a little harder on the gas pedal as my old gray

truck rattled along the rutted road. Dirt and rocks kicked up behind me as the tires slid through the tight mountain turns.

Wind from the open window whipped strands of my deep brown hair across my face whenever I took a corner too fast.

“Long hair tends to get tied up in things.”

My dad’s voice echoed clearly in my head.

I pushed the hair out of my eyes.

He’d warned me about that a hundred times, but I never listened. I hated putting it up. When it was down, I could hide behind it when the world felt like too much.

Dust from the road drifted in, stinging my eyes.

I glanced down for just a second to wipe them—

HONK!

I sprung upright.

Through the dust, a large Jeep barreled toward me from the opposite direction.

I jerked the wheel hard to the right and slammed the brakes.

The back tires fishtailed into the ditch as I swerved past the Jeep, barely avoiding the edge of the road.

“Quick thinking, Chris. But slow down!”

I could hear my dad again. Clear as ever.

My hands tightened on the wheel as the truck steadied.

He’d spent an entire summer teaching me to drive, gripping the seat with white knuckles and clenched teeth. The only time he ever raised his voice—

“SLOW DOWN!”

I let out a breath.

That was two years ago now.

The road quieted again, but his voice didn’t quite leave my head.

Up ahead, a wooden sign came into view.

### **Sporelight Vale Trail.**

That’s the one.

I turned sharply into the small dirt lot, the truck bouncing over ruts and loose gravel. Another vehicle sat parked near the old wooden trail sign.

I yanked the parking brake and slid to a stop beside it.

I did a quick check of my gear and slung my heavy camping backpack over my shoulder. I tried to clamp the waist belt around my waist, but it wouldn’t reach—my belly blocked it. I let the straps fall to my sides with a frustrated huff, shifting the weight on my back.

I wasn't always like this.

The thought crept in quietly as I adjusted the pack again.

Back when I lived with my dad, everything felt easier. His cabin sat tucked into the mountains, surrounded by forest in every direction. Massive panoramic windows stretched across the walls, letting in warm amber sunlight every afternoon. My bedroom overlooked a small valley where the deep blue tree line dipped into the distance, and every evening the sky melted into deep violets and gold streaks as the sun slipped behind the mountains. You could see it from almost anywhere in the house.

We used to hike the trails behind his cabin every day.

Out the back door, and the forest was just there—waiting. Climbing rocks, hiking trails, mountain biking, it was all right outside. I think the only reason I stayed in shape back then was because of where we lived.

My mom's place couldn't have been more different.

Her apartment came with all the concrete, traffic, and noise from the city of Cozmopolis.

She worked long hours as a lab technician for Cozmic Labs, and whenever people asked about her job, she would just shrug and say, "It pays the bills," which usually meant she didn't like it very much.

I didn't like the city much either.

Instead of trails behind me, I had The Comet Deli around the corner. Marco owned the place. Marco was a short, bulky Italian guy with a booming voice and an even bigger personality. The first day we moved in, my mom and I couldn't help but notice the blazing red neon sign that glared into our kitchen window, Its overbearing logo was shaped like a flaming comet pointing straight at the entrance. We stopped in for lunch, and before we even made it to the counter, Marco had both of us by the cheeks, grinning, planting a kiss on each side of our faces like we were long-lost family.

He even helped us carry boxes into the apartment later that day.

After that, The Comet became routine.

Sandwiches. Snacks. Soda.

Lunch, dinner—sometimes both.

I wasn't much of a cook, and with my mom working late nights, it was just easier that way. Outside of school, I spent most of my time playing RPG board games, not video games, actual tabletop stuff. I know it's nerdy, and that's not exactly the reputation I was going for, but Blake liked them, and Blake was my only real friend in the city, so I went along with it.

Somewhere along the way, the snacks and the sitting around caught up with me.

The weight came on slowly... and then all at once.

I shifted under the pack again, adjusting the straps against my shoulders.

Backpacking was supposed to fix that.

I had a plan.

I was going to turn everything around. Get back in shape. Start hiking again. That's all I used to do, right?

It should be simple.

Standing at the entrance to the dirt trail, I glanced over at a weathered wooden map mounted waist-high

in the sun, the paint faded and peeling along the edges.

“Trail Maintained thanks to Cozmic Labs Forest Service.”

I pulled out my phone and snapped a quick selfie in front of the sign to mark the moment, then checked my watch.

8:00 am.

Right on time.

The morning air felt sharp in my lungs as I stepped onto the trail, cold enough to almost make me cough.

“Be bold, start cold.”

My dad’s voice echoed in my head, once again.

I smiled faintly and pulled off my hoodie, stuffing it into my pack as goosebumps prickled across my arms.

The forest smelled alive. Pine and damp earth filled the air as bright rays of sunlight filtered through the branches. I settled into a steady pace, boots crunching softly along the trail.

At the start of any hike, everything always feels more vivid to me. More interesting and unfamiliar. Your mind is more curious about what will be discovered so it feels like you pay attention to more detail.

Every rock I saw along the trail seemed different, some were warm ochre sandstone, others pale limestone, speckled granite, streaks of quartz veined with rust and patches of green lichen. Some were smooth and rounded, worn down by streams long gone, while others were sharp and jagged, like they had just broken free from the earth.

Even the smells of the forest felt new.

Aspen carried a crisp, almost sweet scent that always stirred something in my memory, but here the air was mostly pine—clean, sharp, filling every breath.

I followed the trail as it wound through thick green boughs, the world slowly narrowing to the rhythm of my steps. After a while, the details began to blur together, colors fading into dull greens and browns as my mind drifted.

A trail is kind of like a good book.

The beginning is exciting. The end is worth it.

Everything in between just... moves.

I paused and pulled out my phone, holding it out to snap another picture. Yellow Wildflowers bloomed behind me in patches of sunlight, bright and scattered through the forest.

“Ehh... too blurry.”

I stepped closer to try again, and my foot caught on something soft.

I looked down.

A large brown mushroom pushed up through the dirt, round smooth and spotted.

Blake would have made a whole thing out of the discovery. I could still remember his rant about forest survival before I left, he seemed to be an expert on forest survival even though he never left the city. Blake gifted me his old foraging book before I left.

“You could totally survive out there,” he’d said. “Just eat mushrooms like that guy on TV—Fox Forester!”

I smirked as I thought back to the memory.

“Thanks, Blake. Always looking out for me!”

I picked the mushroom up and continued down the trail, tossing it lightly between my hands as I walked.

By late afternoon, I was making good time. The trail was easier than I expected and looked like it had been used often.

And yet, in four hours of hiking, I hadn’t seen a single person.

“I prefer the solitude,” I told myself.

Still, something about it felt off. The trail was well maintained, just like the sign said, but there was no sign of anyone actually hiking it. Maybe Cozmic Labs came through here for research or something.

My mom might know.

I felt a small knot tighten in my chest thinking back to all the time they had taken from us. Long hours. Late nights. Everything revolving around that place. Tech, media, pharmaceuticals, politics—they had their hands in everything, and of course my parents had been drawn in by the money and the promise of something bigger. The allure of Cozmic Labs drew everyone in. But it wasn't all bad. My parents working for Cozmic Labs always kept things interesting at least.

I shook my head, grinning ear to ear as I remembered back to one of my parents early home experiments.

It was deemed the “Sleep-No-More” project.

Mom had been testing a new compound in the home lab, a thick white mixture that needed to cool overnight. We didn’t have any proper containers left, so she sent me to find something. All I came back with was an old yogurt container from the back of the fridge.

She poured the mixture in, sealed it, and handed it to me.

“Label it. And hide it well or your father will eat it!” she warned letting out a little giggle.

I did as she said, I hid it.

But I didn't label it. My poor dad unsuspectingly ate the “yogurt” for breakfast the next morning...On the bright side he had the most productive week of his life. After-all staying awake 24/7 for five days straight comes with the natural side effect of having plenty of time to get things done. Unfortunately, it was followed by the longest week of deep sleep.

“OOF—!”

I stumbled forward as my toe slammed into a rock, pain shooting up my foot.

Guess that’s what I get for not paying attention. I checked my watch.

3:00 pm.

“Wow... I should be at camp soon.”

I’d been walking on autopilot, my mind too busy reminiscing.

“Shoot! I forgot to look for mushrooms.”

I glanced around.

The trail ahead opened into a rock field, and I took the opportunity to stop and catch my breath. There was no dirt or fallen logs here, just jagged gray stone scattered across the slope. The path was barely visible, but worn spots between the rocks showed where others had climbed before me.

“Huh... they should have called this Rockfall Trail.”

I stepped forward carefully, testing each foothold as I made my way across. The rocks had split into flat surfaces that formed natural steps, but some were too high, forcing me to climb awkwardly, pushing myself up and turning sideways to get over them.

My stubby body was not exactly graceful.

Looking up, I could see where part of the mountainside had collapsed, like an explosion had occurred sending the boulders tumbling down and carving a path through what must have once been thick forest.

I squeezed between two large rocks where a narrow dirt path wound through, placing one foot carefully in front of the other.

Then I froze.

Something brown. Smooth. Spotted.

“A snake!”

I yanked my foot back, arms flailing as I grabbed onto the rock behind me, barely catching myself before slipping.

My heart pounded in my chest as I leaned forward, squinting.

It didn't move.

I stepped closer, slower this time.

Then exhaled.

“...Mushroom.”

A big one.

I laughed under my breath and picked it up, brushing dirt from the cap before stuffing it into my pack.

“Oooooo a Snake mushroom,” I said.

After another stretch of awkward climbing, I finally stepped off the rock field and onto soft dirt again. It felt like stepping onto a pillow. My feet ached, my toe throbbed, and I was more than ready to stop for the day.

Just ahead, a small sign came into view.

“Spore Light Trail Campsite 1.”

I let out an exhausted breath of relief. Good enough.

I dropped my pack to the ground and got to work. The tent went up quickly, the small red dome felt like luxury after the day's hike, I took some time and gathered firewood while there was still light.

By the time the fire crackled to life, dusk had settled in.

I sat back and stared into the flames, letting my thoughts drift.

“I can't believe there were so few mushrooms...”

I pulled the one I had found in the rocks from my pack and flipped open Blake's book, turning the mushroom slowly in my hand as I compared it to the pictures.

"Hmm... brown, no spots—edible... brown with white spots—not edible..."

I turned it again.

"...but brown with brown spots?"

Nothing.

I flipped through the pages again, faster this time, searching for anything that looked even close.

Still nothing came up.

My stomach groaned.

With a sigh, I tossed the mushroom into the fire. My eyes were entranced by the blue flame that engulfed it for a moment until it finally burnt to ash.

I mixed some dry spaghetti with water and let it heat up over the hot coals, while my dinner was cooking I decided to take out my map to examine the trail route for possible foraging spots.

The paper was old and worn, yellowed with age and fraying at the edges, but it was still readable. I traced my planned route with my finger, following the loop around the mountain, when something caught my eye.

An old logging road.

It was faint, barely visible, almost lost beneath newer markings, but it branched away from the main trail and curved back toward the road I had driven in on.

"That could work...an old logging road would be untouched making it the perfect place to search!"

I leaned in closer, studying it more carefully. If I skipped the mountain loop and followed the old road instead, I could spend the day foraging and still make my way back to the truck without too much trouble.

The route looked easier, less elevation, fewer obstacles, and hopefully more mushrooms. So I resigned myself to explore it in the morning.

A big smile crept across my face.

The plan couldn't have been more perfect.

I zipped myself into my tent and curled into my cocoon-like sleeping bag, drifting off with thoughts of a feast of mushrooms waiting for me the next day.

### Chapter 3

The next day I awoke early to gray, cloudy weather.

I groaned, rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

The weather report I had checked before the trip had promised clear skies for days. Now the forest sat under a dull, washed-out sky, like someone had drained all the life from it overnight.

Still in my sweatpants, I stepped out of the tent and took a few deep breaths, hoping for the smell of fresh rain. Mornings in the wilderness had always smelled the best.

Trips with my dad had left me with plenty of those memories. Some mornings carried the crisp scent of dew on the grass. Others, after a night of rain, were filled with that rich, earthy air mixed with wildflowers, my favorite! A smell so good that Cozmic labs would bottle it and sell it if they could.

But this morning wasn't like those.

Instead, the air hung thick with the smell of moldering leaves, damp and heavy in the mist that clung to the campsite.

I glanced up again. The clouds darkened toward the northern edge of the mountain, where a faint curtain of rain seemed to fall in the distance. It was hard to tell for sure, but it didn't look promising.

I'd better get moving.

If I wanted to hike without getting soaked, I didn't have much time.

The coals from last night's fire were still glowing faintly red, even with the damp settling over everything.

"A bit of luck," I mumbled.

At least I wouldn't have to rebuild the fire.

I set a small cup of water over the coals to heat, then stirred in a scoop of oatmeal. After sipping some warmed tea by the fire ring, I pulled on my clothes and boots and set off down the trail, eager to find the old logging road.

It didn't take long.

I was surprised I hadn't noticed it before—it sat only about a quarter mile from camp. Through the overgrowth, I could just make out its shape veering off from the main trail. From the south, the angle and dense brush must have hidden it the day before.

When loggers abandoned these roads, the forest slowly reclaimed them, but not completely. The ground often stayed flat enough to follow.

This one looked easy.

Two faint dirt ruts, left long ago by truck tires, still cut through the tree stumps and grass. It didn't look like anyone had walked it in years.

"I'll find some mushrooms today for sure," I said, a little too excited.

I turned and hurried back to camp.

I broke everything down as fast as I could, stuffing my sleeping bag and tent back into my pack in a rush. There was no time to waste.

I scattered the fire ring, spreading the burnt logs and rocks, then grabbed a few pine branches and swept the ground clean.

"Leave no trace."

Another lesson from the wilderness books..

I was so pleased with myself as I looked around, the campsite looked untouched by the time I finished.

There was just one problem.

I skipped inventory.

Always check your pack. Sleeping bag, water, map, lights, food. The one tip from the book I had forgotten.

"Check your list once, then check your list twice, just to make sure your trip is nice." was how my dad used to phrase it.

But I didn't check anything.

Like always, I missed a step. Just like with my dad's Sleep-No-More yogurt disaster.

I hoisted my pack and headed down the logging road with a grin, oblivious to the fact that I had left my trail map and dinner behind at camp.

I didn't even think about the map again that day.

The logging road pulled me in completely. It was quiet in a way that felt almost unreal. Too still, too untouched. There was something strange about it, like stepping into an enchanted forest.

Clusters of blue and purple wildflowers spread across the ground, giving the earth a faint wash of color. For a moment, I could almost pretend the sky above was just as bright, instead of the dull gray pressing down through the trees.

I hadn't gone far when I noticed them.

Mushrooms!

They dotted the edges of the old ruts and hid around the base of the tree stumps—small, white ones with delicate gills underneath their caps.

I dropped my pack and pulled out Blake's paperback foraging guide. After flipping through a few pages, I found a match.

Edible field mushrooms.

"Alright," I said, smiling.

Now this was more like it.

I moved quickly from cluster to cluster, picking only the best ones, dropping them carefully into my bag. Every so often, I wandered off the road toward larger mushrooms growing at the base of some of

the trees.

These mushrooms were bigger, about six inches wide, with smooth, rounded brown caps. Some grew at odd angles, their stems twisted sideways out of the bark in ways that didn't look quite natural.

No spots.

I remembered the page immediately.

“Brown, no spots....edible!”

I gathered a few and added them to my dry sack.

Time had slipped by without me noticing. What felt like an hour turned into four.

By late afternoon, I was muggy, tired, and completely worn out from darting back and forth along the road.

I finally stopped in a clearing where the ground softened into a thick layer of moss. Sunlight filtered through the clouds and trees just enough to warm the space.

The forest felt perfect for a moment. I halfway expected a unicorn to come bounding through the trees it was so beautiful.

I dropped my pack and leaned against a wide tree stump to rest. A small cluster of mushrooms poked up through its sawed-off top.

I weighed my haul from the day in my hands, not bad. My stomach gurgled

I unzipped my backpacks front pocket and pulled out a Cozmic Complete Meal bar wrapped in bright neon green and blue foil.

I had impulse bought a couple of the bars at the camp store. The sparkling labels suckered me in while I was surrounded by them just waiting at the check-stand.

Cozmic labs products had a way of sneaking into everything, even camp food.

I tried to avoid their stuff when I could, but it was hard to argue with a bar that claimed to replace an entire meal for only \$3.99! I had only packed the two for quick lunches, but honestly, I could've brought a whole box and survived the week on them.

People on the weekly Cozmic News features did it all the time. Or at least, that's what they said. “The Cozmic Meal bar challenge lose weight in one week guaranteed!” touted the ads.

Still... it always felt a little off.

I tore open the wrapper.

Inside was a glossy, marbled slab of blue and green that looked nothing like food.

I flipped it over and squinted at the ingredient list.

Xcombohdrolated Blu X12, Syrexidedehydrated Olexides, Lentricile, barbuterol, corn syrup, Red 49... and a proprietary blend of CFDA-approved supplements.

“I don't know what any of that is,” I said, “but somehow it's fine to eat?”

I hesitated, then bit off a small piece.

Instantly, flavor exploded across my tongue.

Turkey. Mashed potatoes. Cranberries. Bread, butter and even Wine!

All at once!

I chewed faster, trying to keep up as the taste intensified, the bite seeming to swell in my mouth.

I swallowed quickly.

Almost immediately, my stomach felt heavy, full and bloated with gas.

Of course.

That was the whole point.

Cozmic products always promised something big—life-changing results that never quite worked the way they claimed.

I leaned back against the stump, letting my eyes drift closed for a moment and began dreaming of old memories.

My dad, standing in the yard with a bag of Cozmic-cut no grow lawn powder, determined to never mow the grass again.

He spread it carefully, covering every inch of the lawn.

But he forgot the gloves and every time he brushed his dark hair out of his face, the blue powder clung to it, streaking through it like paint.

The next morning, he came downstairs with hair that rivaled Tina Turner!

Apparently, Cozmic-cut didn't just stop grass growth.

It accelerated hair growth!

My mom and I laughed about that one for weeks while my dad swapped mowing the lawn for constant trips to the barber.

“OUCH!” I yelled.

I awoke to a sharp, gnawing bite at my fingertips. I must have dozed off against the stump because a squirrel had somehow gathered the courage to come right up and nibble at the sticky crumbs of the Cozmic bar around my hands. The second I moved, it bounded off and shot up a nearby tree, my eyes following it as it disappeared into the branches.

Behind the tree line, the sky had turned a darker shade of deep gray.

I panicked and quickly checked my watch—7:00 pm.

“Oh no, I fell asleep!”

I was supposed to be near the dirt road by now. I still had at least four or five more hours of hiking ahead of me to reach the spot I had planned to stop at for the night.

“Shoot, Chris!” I yelled, kicking the stump in frustration.

At that point, there wasn't much I could do except stay where I was. I would have to camp here for the night and start hiking early in the morning if I wanted any chance of catching up and making it back to my truck by Sunday afternoon. Even then, I'd probably have to move at a near sprint to stay on track.

I decided to pull out my trail map and see if there was any possible shortcut back.

I opened the side pocket and looked inside.

No map.

“Hmm... no worries,” I said to myself. Sometimes I kept it in the top pocket.

I checked the top pocket carefully.

Still nothing.

I slowly began pulling items out of my pack, one by one, checking everything as I went. With each item I set aside, the feeling in my chest grew heavier. My stomach dropped as the realization finally hit me.

I had left my trail map back at the previous campsite!

Along with the dehydrated dinner I had planned to eat tonight.

“I can’t catch a break,” I groaned, dropping my pack beside the stump.

My first backpacking trip alone, and I’d be heading home with a disaster story to tell. Just great.

My mom would have expected something like this. She was so organized, everything in her life was planned, double-checked, and triple-checked. I tried to be like that sometimes, but I took after my dad more. He always said life needed a little spontaneity to be exciting.

Right now, though, it didn’t feel exciting at all.

My stomach growled again, louder this time, and I winced. A big twelve-inch Mortadella sandwich with a side of pickle chips from the Comet popped into my mind so vividly that my mouth started watering.

I swallowed and reached into my bag, pulling out the other Cozmic Complete Meal bar. I decided to eat half of it now and save the rest for lunch while hiking tomorrow. It was getting dark quickly, and I only had a short window to set up camp while there was still some light left, so I got to work while chewing on the sticky, overly flavorful bite.

I spent the next forty-five minutes struggling to set everything up.

I tried to start a fire using a makeshift fire ring I had thrown together with some rocks, but the ground and the nearby wood were too wet to catch. The wood only hissed and smoldered, refusing to burn no matter how much I tried.

The tent wasn’t any better. The stakes wouldn’t hold in the wet, loose moss, and without them the main pole wouldn’t stay upright. The whole thing sagged and collapsed in on itself, looking more like a crumpled bag on the ground than an actual tent.

After one last frustrated attempt, stomping down hard on a stake with my foot, I finally gave up.

I slumped back against the stump and pulled my sleeping bag around me.

I was definitely stuck in a bad spot. Everything around me was too damp to start a fire or properly pitch a tent. I was going to have to cowboy camp, completely exposed to the open air.

My mood sank even further.

At that point, I just wanted to call my mom and have her come get me. I was done with this trip.

I pulled my phone out of my side pocket, flicked on my headlamp, and angled the light downward so I could see the screen better.

No signal.

No GPS.

No way to call for help.

I stared at the screen for a moment, then absentmindedly started flipping through the photos I had taken earlier that day. Pictures of mushrooms filled the screen as I scrolled.

Then I paused.

Wait a minute.

The trail sign....Of course!

I quickly swiped back to the beginning of my trip and found it—my selfie with the trail sign. It included a small portion of the map, just barely visible in the background. The image was blurry and the map was tiny, but it was something.

I pinched the screen and zoomed in, trying to trace the lines with my fingers.

How far had I gone?

The logging road wasn't even marked on the sign.

Between wandering off the path, stopping to forage, and jumping from mushroom cluster to mushroom cluster, I had completely lost track of time and distance.

Three miles?

One?

I had no idea.

I forced myself to stay calm.

Okay... think.

I estimated a slow walking pace, or about two miles an hour. Using that, I started tracing out a rough route with my fingers as best as I could.

It looked like it would take about four hours to reach the dirt road.

Then another two hours to get back to my truck.

It was doable. And I was still on schedule. It wasn't the end of the world I thought as I let out a sigh.

I could still make it out by Sunday, just like I had planned. Maybe a little later than expected, but not enough for my mom to worry.

The first half of the Cozmic bar didn't sit well.

Instead of making me feel full, it just left my stomach aching and tight, like it couldn't decide whether it was hungry or stuffed. I should have learned to expect the typical Cozmic Labs side effects by now.

To distract myself, I decided to inventory the rest of my gear properly this time. After forgetting both my map and my dinner at the last campsite, I couldn't afford to lose anything else.

Especially now.

Especially if I was actually lost.

My food situation wasn't great.

A scoop of oatmeal, Some tea, half a Cozmic Meal bar. And the mushrooms.

I poured out my dry sack and counted them carefully.

Eighteen mushrooms total, including the two larger ones.

Not bad.

I picked up a couple of the smaller white mushrooms and ate them raw, chewing slowly, then packed the rest away for later.

Just in case.

The thought crept in quietly, whether I wanted it to or not.

What if I actually needed them to survive?

A chill ran through me as the last bit of daylight faded and the forest sank into darkness.

I pulled my sleeping bag up around my face, trying to block everything out and fall asleep.

That night, my dreams were anything but normal.

Tiny blue and green creatures darted through the forest around me. At first glance, they looked almost like gnomes, but the closer they got, the more wrong they felt. Their teeth were sharp and gnashing, their ears pointed, and glowing neon mushroom caps pulsed on their heads.

All of their beady little eyes were suddenly focused on me. All at once they lunged at me.

I tried to run, but my legs wouldn't cooperate. Each step felt slow and heavy, like I was stuck in mud. Then suddenly, my stride stretched further and further until I was leaping through the air in massive bounds.

Ten feet.

Twenty.

Forty.

I was flying forward like some kind of superhero, landing hard and launching myself again.

But it didn't matter. The horde of angry creatures kept up with me.

Every time I landed, they swarmed me, clawing and biting at my clothes, ripping at my skin from every direction. I kicked them off and leapt again, trying to escape.

The forest blurred away beneath me and a sprawling metropolis surrounded my view.

I was jumping from building to building now, clearing entire rooftops in a single bound. Higher and higher I climbed until I finally reached the tallest skyscraper around.

I stopped for a moment and looked down, hoping I had finally lost them. I could hear the echos of beeps and sirens from cars and ambulances from the streets far below.

From the corner of my eye I caught them. Just ten floors below me, a mass of glowing blue and green mushroom caps had crawled up the side of the building.

They were coming....Fast!

I turned and jumped toward the next building, expecting to glide across like before.

Instead, I dropped. Like a rock!

Faster and faster, the ground rushed up toward me as the wind roared in my ears. Behind me, the gnomes leapt from the building, falling after me. Snapping their teeth in anger.

“AHHHHHHH!”

It's just a dream, Chris. Wake up!

I pinched myself midair and gasped as I realized nothing I did could wake me from this nightmare!  
I twisted just in time to see the ground rushing up to meet me.....