

# Eighth Bean



# Eighth Bean

*The mist*

J.Swimdog



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# **CHAPTER 1**

## **A Strange Sighting**

THE yellow school bus came to a stop with a hiss of brakes, the distinctive squeak of the door opening announcing their stop. Jason and Kyle Becker grabbed their backpacks and hopped off, giving a wave to the driver.

"Later Mrs. Clark!" Kyle called out as they stepped onto the sidewalk in front of their family's two-story home. Jason brushed his shaggy brown hair out of his eyes, adjusting the straps of his backpack.

"Dude, did you actually understand any of Mr. Wilson's lecture on the French Revolution today?"

"Physics or French class?" Kyle smirked at his twin.

"You know what I mean," Jason rolled his eyes as they headed up the front walk. He could already smell the tempting aroma of their mom's famous spaghetti sauce wafting from the kitchen window. As they reached the front door, Kyle noticed something peculiar not far from the house.

"Hey, you see that?"

Jason followed his brother's gaze towards the forest. A faint mist hung in the air, almost shimmering in the late afternoon sunlight.

"Oh yeah, weird..."

Before they could ponder it further, the front door swung open.

"There are my two favorite brainiacs!"

Their mom beamed at them from the doorway.

"Hurry up and get inside, dinner's almost ready."

The twins stepped into the welcoming house, dropping their backpacks by the door. As Jason closed it behind them, he couldn't help one last glance towards the strange fog hovering near the trees.



For just a brief moment, he thought he detected a faint, pulsing glow within the mist.

The twin brothers thundered up the stairs to their rooms.

"Boys! Make sure you wash up, dinner will be ready in twenty minutes," their mom's voice rang out from the kitchen below.

"Yeah, yeah!" Kyle called back as he dropped his backpack and hurried over to his gaming computer. Across the hallway, Jason did the same, the two siblings taking their seats in front of their beefy rigs.

The brothers were so proud of their setups - they had saved up all summer working as food runners at the local restaurant in order to build these high-end gaming PCs and purchase the massive 32-inch curved monitors that now dominated their desks. But when they tried to connect, Jason frowned at the "No Internet" error message.

"Aw man, the Wi-Fi's down again?" He stuck his head out into the hallway.

"Hey Kyle, can you reboot the router?"

"On it!" came the reply, followed by the sounds of Kyle clomping back downstairs. A minute later, Jason's computer pinged as the wireless network reconnected. He grinned, pulling up a browser window.

"Let's see if that did the trick."

Instead of his game's website, he navigated to Google Maps, wanting to test the internet connection speed. But the familiar green and blue map user interface was gone, replaced by three bizarre options:

- *Virtual dive*
- *Dive with a connected device*
- *Your own real time dive*

Puzzled, Jason clicked the third option. Immediately, a small video window popped up, showing a photorealistic animated girl looking back at him. Her lips moved, and an audio request came through his speakers.

"Greetings. Please enable camera access and stand back for anthropometric scanning."

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Jason's eyes went wide. "Uh...okay?" He dragged the cursor to accept the camera permissions request.

"Thank you." The girl's face broke into a warm smile.

"Please step away from your device now."



As Jason stood up and backed his chair away from the desk, a series of green laser-like lights emerged from the monitor's webcam. They tracked over his body from head to toe in a dizzying flurry. Rendered speechless, the teenage boy could only gape as the virtual girl spoke again.

"Scanning complete. You are ready to dive. Please select your destination."

The laser-like green light disappeared and Jason's monitor showed several photorealistic 3D planetary bodies - the Earth, Moon and Mars, slowly rotating against an inky backdrop of space. Small spaceships and satellites drifted through outer space.

"Woah..." Jason's hands hovered over the keyboard, eyes wide with disbelief as he took in the incredible extraterrestrial vista before him.

"Okay Jason, let's get ready for dinner!" His brother's voice suddenly shouted from the room next door, startling him.

Still stunned, Jason barely forced himself to look up from the mesmerizing screen. He slowly rose from the desk chair and moved towards the hallway, throwing one last bewildered glance at the monitor as spaceships and planets continued their serene orbits.

What was going on here? How was this even possible? Jason shook his head in amazement as he crossed over to the stairs to head down for their evening meal. He had so many questions.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Virtually in the Future**

JASON clomped down the stairs, still half in a daze from the strange cosmic vista he had just witnessed on his computer. As he entered the kitchen, the rest of his family was already seated at the table - mom passing a basket of garlic bread to Kyle while their 3-year-old, high-energy Jack Russell Terrier, Jack, excitedly circled underfoot, tail wagging furiously in hopes of scoring a morsel.

"There you are!" His mom glanced up with a warm smile as Jack hopped up, planting his front paws on the edge of her chair, hoping she would give him something tasty from the table.

"I was just telling your brother, I saw this mischievous pup chasing squirrels in the backyard again when I got home. He's always on the go, isn't he?" She chuckled affectionately, scratching behind Jack's floppy ears.

Jason opened his mouth to respond, but the words caught in his throat. Instead, his eyes quickly found his twin's across the table, a look of utter bewilderment plastering his face.

Kyle immediately recognized that expression - it was the same one Jason had when he'd caught a glimpse of the new Camaro model their neighbor had just bought and instantly mistook it for an Autobot at first glance. His brother's jaw literally hung open, as if he could barely comprehend what he'd just seen.

Before their mother could ask what was wrong, Kyle gave a subtle shake of his head at Jason, throwing him a look that said 'We'll talk about it later.'

Jason seemed to recover slightly, blinking rapidly as he slid into his chair. He threw one more furtive glance towards Kyle, then turned his attention to the plate mom set in front of him.



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The delicious aroma of her signature pasta helped bring him back to the present moment.

But the second this meal was over, Jason knew he and his brother were going to have an awful lot to discuss...

After helping their mom clear the dishes, the twins hurried back up to their rooms, Jack the terrier trotting at their heels. As soon as they were inside with the door closed, Jason whirled to face his brother.

"Dude, you're not going to believe this," he blurted out, eyes still wide with disbelief. He grabbed Kyle by the arm and steered him over to the monitor, which still displayed the photorealistic 3D planetary bodies slowly spinning in the void.

Kyle's jaw dropped open.

"What the...? Is that the Earth, Moon, and Mars?"

Jason rapidly recounted the bizarre events with the virtual AI assistant asking him to initiate a "dive" and select a destination environment.

"So I guess these are the options for where we can go? But get this - it said to choose the Moon or Mars, we need some kind of access key."

The two brothers looked at each other, then back at the screen in stunned silence. This was proving to be no ordinary evening of gaming.

Kyle tentatively reached out and moved the cursor over the Earth's rendered sphere.

"Well, we know for sure we have access to our own planet at least," he said slowly.

"What do you think, should we...?"

Jason nodded, unable to hide the excited grin spreading across his face. He quickly typed in "Millennium Park Chicago, Illinois" into the provided fields. This was just too audacious and incredible to pass up. With a gulp, Kyle pressed the Enter key. Suddenly, the monitor's camera seemed to detach from its housing, stretching out into an all-encompassing curved virtual reality display.

Jason gasped as the unmistakable iconic backdrop of downtown



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Chicago materialized before his eyes.

However, this was no ordinary view of the Windy City. Iconic skyscrapers soared overhead and flying vehicles zipped between them and elevated roadways.

While Jason still remained firmly rooted in the physical world of his room, on the monitor, however, a photorealistic 3D figure very similar to him began rendering to life amid the Chicago street scene.

A few seconds later, a virtual duplicate of Jason stood on the holographic sidewalk, and pedestrians of the future passed by, not paying attention to his shimmering figure.

"Hey, that's me!" Jason scrambled forward, reaching out to touch the simulation but feeling only the smooth screen. He turned to his brother with an amazed look.

"Did you see that??"

Kyle could only nod slowly, eyes wide. As the cyber-duplicate of his brother began curiously walking down the digital metropolis streets, he watched its every movement tracked in the display with eerie precision.

"This is... I don't even have words," Jason finally managed to say.

The AI girl's idea of a "real-time dive" was clearly something far more advanced than he could have imagined. Somehow, it had created a sentient virtual avatar mirroring Jason's likeness and released it into the future rendition of the Windy City.

A slight shudder ran through his body as he realized the implication. If this avatar could travel into future environments, who knew where else it could potentially go? The brothers watched, utterly spellbound, as the virtual Jason continued taking in the sights and sounds.

Pedestrians in casual outfits strolled by, some tapping on handheld devices while others chatted animatedly; the brothers could even distinguish their voices. None still paid any mind to the one more shimmering figure standing just off the sidewalk.

The cyber-Jason stepped sideways onto the curb, getting out of the flow of foot traffic. It turned its head, appearing to study the

sleek, aerodynamic shuttlecraft zipping silently between the soaring silver skyscrapers high overhead.

"Look at that..." Jason breathed.

After a couple beats, text prompts materialized on the bottom of the screen:

- *Choose a Route*
- *Free Roam*

Kyle pointed at the options with his finger.

"Well? What do you want to do, man? This is your digital clone's rookie mission to the future".

He flashed his brother a lopsided grin, but Jason could detect the excitement shining in his twin's eyes as well. This was quite literally like a science fiction dream come true.

Giving his head a shake of disbelief, Jason scooted the keyboard closer.

"Let's just explore for now. Who knows what other insane things we might stumble across."

With trembling fingers, Jason selected the "Free roam" option. Instantly, the cyber-avatar began strolling down the walkway, its photorealistic form flickering subtly with each step into the unknown.

## CHAPTER 3

### Exploring the Future City

THE cyber-avatar of Jason walked slowly down the pristine white sidewalk, head swiveling back and forth as it tried to take in the dizzying sights of this hyper-advanced Chicago.

Just like the twins watching through the VR display, their digital doppelganger's photorealistic face was etched with an expression of utter amazement. It gazed up in awe at the sleek, aerodynamic aircraft zipping silently between the soaring silver skyscrapers reaching impossibly high into the sky.

The city streets themselves brimmed with striking differences from the 21st century. The glass-lined buildings and facades of shops and cafes seemed to shimmer and almost ripple, their exteriors in no way hinting at the much vaster interior dimensions visible through the transparent materials. Everything looked bright, spacious and almost ethereal.

As a robotic garbage truck silently hummed by, scooping up litter and powering itself with some unseen energy source, apparently obtained from the same garbage, the cyber-avatar turned its shimmering form to take in the scene more fully. Pedestrians continued strolling past, some wearing visors or augmented reality glasses, others listening to audio inputs or flicking through holographic display panels. None spared the boy's digital exploration avatar a second glance.

The twins noticed the same thin backpack-like devices on the backs of some of the pedestrians as Jason's cyber-avatar had.

"Look, they have the same backpacks as... me?"

Jason slowly finished his question, watching his virtual doppelganger stroll among the crowd.



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"Perhaps this is how virtual travelers like you are marked," Kyle guessed.

"This is...incredible," Jason breathed, his hands hovering over the keyboard, mesmerized.

"I don't even know where to look first."

Kyle simply shook his head slowly, eyes wide and somewhat glazed over as he struggled to comprehend everything playing out on the monitor before them.

The cyber-avatar continued its approach along the pristine walkway towards the vast, open green-space of Millennium Park. But as the iconic place came into view, all three - the digital rendition as well as the spellbound twins - were struck frozen in utter amazement.

Before them, the expansive park grounds were a dizzying, chaotic whirlwind of ceaseless activity and motion. Pedestrians in bright, casually stylish outfits hurried about, seemingly oblivious to the myriad aircraft of all shapes and sizes zipping silently overhead. Sleekly sculpted hovercraft glided by at street level along brightly illuminated pathways.

At certain points, those glowing thoroughfares extended outwards, terminating abruptly at the water's edge before ascending upwards into the sky at an angle. It was at these precise junctions where the snub-nosed hovering cars would rapidly decelerate, sides shifting and sprouting propellers or on the move, morphing into aerodynamic mini-jets as they soared up and out across the waterfront.

In the opposite direction, another steady stream of arrivals came in, nearly skimming the lake surface before smoothly transitioning to terraced roadways. As they touched down, their configurations reverted to standard automotive shapes and sizes before pulling away.

Zipping across the park's interior on elevated tracks, tubular solo train compartments resembling giant chrome pipe-fish whooshed by in a silent blurring rush, depositing and collecting pedestrians.

But perhaps the most mind boggling sight centered on the Pier

The famous lakeside Ferris wheel now looked different. In its place stood a colossal wheel-shaped building, its staggering size dwarfing the surrounding skyscrapers. Numerous small aircraft and flying vehicles circled the Big Wheel, giving the impression of busy air traffic.

The shapes of the aircrafts were unimaginable. Some were shaped like balls and discs, while others were shaped like fruits. Regularly spaced, illuminated niches along its surface glowed in light green, allowing a steady flow of incoming craft to fly in, while light blue niches permitted others to fly out before disappearing from sight. Some of them appeared to be docked at various points along the Wheel, suggesting the structure functioned as a hub for both departing and arriving aircraft, and perhaps even spacecraft.

A wide road led to the Wheel, along which a continuous stream of cars with unimaginable designs delivered departing air passengers and picked up arriving ones.

One more breathtaking scene was an array of reflective bean sculptures. The iconic Cloud Gate installation or Mirror Bean was still in its place on the ground while all others - each the same shape as the Chicago landmark but in varying sizes, hovered suspended in midair at varying heights and angles, almost impossibly defying gravity without any apparent supports or tethers. Both human and virtual visitors congregated in throngs, craning their necks, they seemed to be looking for a specific place to better take in this masterpiece from every vantage point. Sightseeing shuttles and personal aircars slowed to a crawl, some even orbiting in tight loops to experience the full kinetic sculpture perspective.

Above the mesmerizing sights of Millennium Park, silver skyscrapers continued rising majestically along the entire perimeter, their sleek forms cutting into the skyline.

Directly in front of the vast panoramic windows of one particularly towering spire, several beautiful austere aircraft hovered serenely in place, as if standing guard over the urban utopia below. Their sculpted, minimalist shapes projected an almost regal quality,

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watching over the frenetic organized chaos of the aerial kaleidoscope unfolding all around the landmark park grounds.

"Shiitake mushrooms..." Jason was the first to break the awed silence, repeating their dad's favorite words of surprise and amazement.

That's when everything abruptly seized in place - the avatar, the mesmerizing aerial kaleidoscope, and even the lakefront scenery beyond.



A moment later, it all dissolved into pixelated shards before a message flashed across the screen - "Attempting to reconnect..."

Blinking hard as they were pulled back to the reality of Jason's bedroom, the stunned twins simply sat motionless for several long seconds. Until their mom's distant call shook them free of the transporting vision:

"Boys! Get outside and take Jack for his walk!"

Exchanging wide-eyed looks, neither Jason nor Kyle could find the words to vocalize what they had just experienced. A futuristic utopia unlike anything they could've imagined...and it had felt utterly, breathtakingly real.



## **CHAPTER 4**

### **A Walk and a Revelation**

STILL reeling from the mind-bending experience, Jason and Kyle quickly leashed up an exuberant Jack, his tail wagging furiously as he pranced by the front door, his favorite tennis ball clenched firmly in his mouth. As they set out into the quiet evening neighborhood, the Jack Russell Terrier strained at the lead, eagerly seeking out any squirrels foolish enough to cross his path.

The sun had dipped below the horizon, casting long shadows across the suburban landscape.

For several minutes, the twins walked in a stunned silence, each trying to process the incredible sights and sounds of the futuristic Chicago they had just witnessed. Jack, oblivious to their amazement, happily trotted along, occasionally dropping his ball to bark at a squirrel before snatching it back up and continuing on.

Finally, Kyle broke the contemplative quiet.

"So...what do you think that was all about? I mean, how is any of that even possible?"

Jason shook his head, still struggling to wrap his mind around it.

"I don't know, man. At first, I thought maybe it was just some kind of crazy advanced VR simulation, but...it felt way too real for that."

"Yeah," Kyle agreed, "and the way everything moved and felt...it was like we were really there."

They walked on, exchanging increasingly wild theories and ideas, trying to make sense of the inexplicable events. But no matter how they looked at it, neither could come up with a rational explanation for the hyper-realistic glimpse into a distant future.



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Suddenly, Kyle stopped short, causing Jack to yank at the leash as he attempted to continue his single-minded squirrel pursuit.

"Hey, wait a second...remember that weird fog we saw by the woods when we got off the bus today?"

Jason's eyes widened. "Yeah...., I do. But it's.."

He scanned the darkening treeline, confirming what he had just realized.

"It's gone now. Completely vanished."

The brothers exchanged a long, meaningful look as the pieces started to fall into place.

"What if...what if that fog was some kind of, I don't know, a time portal or something?"

Kyle's voice was hushed, as if saying it too loud would somehow negate the possibility. Jason slowly nodded, his mind racing.

"And when the internet glitched out, somehow my computer connected to the future's network instead of ours..." He snapped his fingers.

"That glow! Remember how I thought I saw a faint light inside the mist? What if those were the lights of the future city, bleeding through into our time?"

"And maybe the fog acts like a gateway," Jason continued, "connecting different times and places."

"So what?, the name and password of your network matched completely randomly with the name and password of the somebody's network from the future?" Kyle asked incredulously.

"Why not?, the world would have died of boredom long ago if it weren't for happenstance. At least this explains something" Jason answered him confidently.

For a moment, they both fell silent, the enormity of the implications sinking in. If they were right, they had just accidentally discovered a window into a world decades ahead of their own.

"We can't tell anyone about this," Jason finally said, his tone serious.

"At least not yet. Not until we know more."

Kyle readily agreed.

"And if that fog comes back...I say we try to connect again. See what else we can find out."

A mischievous grin spread across his face.

"But this time, I'm making my own avatar to explore with."

Jack, as if sensing the momentous nature of their realization, chose that moment to drop his ball and let out a triumphant bark, having finally treed one of the pesky squirrels. The sudden noise jolted the twins back to the present, and they couldn't help but laugh at the contrast between their earth-shattering discovery and their dog's simple, single-minded joy.

As they turned back towards home, their minds swimming with possibilities and questions, one thing was certain - their lives had just taken a turn for the extraordinary.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **Family Saturday**

THE next morning, Jason and Kyle were up and about uncharacteristically early for a Saturday. They bounded down the stairs, startling their mom who was brewing her morning coffee in the kitchen.

"Well, good morning, you two!" she greeted them, eyebrows raised in surprise. "What has you up and at 'em so early on a weekend?"

"Morning, Mom!" Jason replied, grabbing Jack's leash from the hook by the door.

"We thought we'd take Jack for a quick walk before breakfast."

Their mom's surprise only grew.

"Really? That's unusual for a Saturday. But sure, just don't be too long. I'll have breakfast ready when you get back."

At the mention of his walk, Jack came scampering into the kitchen, his favorite ball clenched firmly in his mouth. His tail wagged furiously as he spun in excited circles by the front door. Chuckling, Kyle clipped on the leash and the twins headed out into the crisp morning air.

As soon as they were outside, their eyes automatically scanned the woods, hoping to catch a glimpse of the mysterious fog from yesterday. But the forest edge was clear, the rising sun promising a beautiful, mist-free day. Jason sighed, shoulders slumping slightly.

"Guess it was too much to hope it would be back so soon."

Kyle shrugged, trying to stay optimistic.

"Maybe it'll come back later. Or tonight, like last time."

"I can't stop thinking about that future city," Jason thought, glancing towards the woods.

"What if we never see it again?"

As they walked, they fell into discussing school, friends, and the upcoming science fair project they were planning. The strange events of the previous evening took a temporary back seat to more typical teenage concerns.

Before long, they looped back home, Jack trotting contentedly beside them. As they entered the house, the rich aroma of freshly brewed espresso filled the air.

"Dad!"

The twins exclaimed in unison, spotting their father sitting at the kitchen table with a plate of breakfast. Detective Becker looked up from his coffee, a warm smile spreading across his face.

"Morning, boys! I got in late last night, didn't want to wake you."

The brothers eagerly sat down, peppering their dad with questions about his latest case as their mom set out plates piled high with pancakes and fruit.

"Dad, did you catch any bad guys this week?" Jason asked, his eyes wide with excitement.

Detective Becker chuckled, pouring syrup over his pancakes.

"Well, let's just say we made some progress on a big case. But enough about work. How's school going for you two?"

The conversation flowed easily, detective Becker skillfully redirecting to ask the twins about their classes and friends.

"I aced my math test!" Kyle announced proudly, taking a big bite of his pancake.

"That's fantastic, Kyle!" their mom praised, smiling warmly.

"And how about you, Jason? How's your science project coming along?"

Jason grinned, "It's going great! I'm building a model of the solar system. Tim's helping me paint the planets."

As the family lingered over breakfast, they made plans for the rest of the Saturday - a trip to the batting cages, maybe a movie later, and then dinner at their favorite pizza place downtown.

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"Can we go to the batting cages first?" Jason pleaded, bouncing in his seat.

"I want to practice my swing!"

"Yeah, and then we can catch that new superhero movie!"

Kyle chimed in, his eyes sparkling with anticipation.

Their dad nodded, smiling at their enthusiasm.

"Sounds like a plan, boys. We'll head to the batting cages after breakfast, then grab lunch and catch the afternoon show."

"And don't forget, we're having dinner at Tony's Pizza tonight!" their mom reminded them.

"Yes! I can't wait for their pepperoni and extra cheese pizza!" Jason exclaimed, high-fiving his brother.

But in the back of Jason and Kyle's minds, the incredible world they had glimpsed still beckoned, filled with unimaginable wonders and possibilities. They knew it was only a matter of time before they would once again be drawn to unravel the secrets of the future that had inexplicably touched their lives.

For now, though, pancakes, family, and the promise of a fun-filled Saturday took precedence. The rest could wait.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **The Return of the Mist**

SUNDAY morning found Jason rushing down the stairs, having overslept and missed the family's morning walk. As he entered the kitchen, still rubbing sleep from his eyes, he saw everyone already gathered around the table, ready for breakfast.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," his mom greeted him with a smile.

"You missed a great walk this morning. The weather was perfect."

"Aw, man," Jason groaned, sliding into his seat.

"Why didn't anyone wake me?"

"Your dad and I thought you could use the extra rest," she replied, passing him a plate of eggs.

"Besides, Kyle and your dad already took Jack out. They just got back a little while ago."

Jason turned to his brother, hoping Kyle had seen the fog during their morning outing. He caught his brother's eye, but Kyle slowly shook his head from side to side. As they dug into their meal, their parents shared their plans for the evening.

"We've been invited to a dinner party at the Johnsons' tonight," their dad said, sipping his coffee.

"You boys okay holding down the fort?"

The twins nodded, exchanging a quick glance. A parent-free evening could be the perfect opportunity to further explore the mysterious fog and its connection to the future. "Finally, a chance to figure out what's really going on," Jason thought, his heart racing with excitement.

The rest of the morning fell into the familiar rhythm of a lazy Sunday. Jason and Kyle found themselves in the backyard, shooting



hoops and occasionally glancing towards the woods, hoping for a glimpse of the strange mist. Jack, ever the energetic companion, darted between them, more interested in the basketball than his smaller toys.

He leaped and snapped at the ball, getting increasingly frustrated when his small jaws couldn't quite get a grip on the large sphere.

Suddenly, Jason froze mid-shot.

"Kyle, look!"

He pointed towards the treeline, where faint tendrils of fog were beginning to creep out from the forest's edge.

In their moment of distraction, Jack seized his chance. With a determined bark, he chased after the forgotten basketball, desperately trying to sink his small teeth into the unyielding surface as he bounded towards the woods.

"Jack, stop!" the twins yelled in unison, sprinting after their mischievous pup. But Jack, caught up in the thrill of the chase, paid no heed. Yapping excitedly, he continued his single-minded pursuit of the ball, darting straight into the thickening mist.

Without hesitation, Jason and Kyle plunged in after him. The fog swallowed them whole, muffling the sounds of the outside world. They quickly spotted Jack a few feet ahead, sniffing the ground in confusion, having lost his prized ball in the dense haze.

Kyle scooped up the bewildered terrier, holding him close. As he did, the brothers became aware of a faint glow emanating from deeper within the mist. Shadows and silhouettes began to take shape, forming the outlines of towering structures that seemed to hover above the ground, defying gravity. These buildings were unlike anything the boys had seen before. Mesmerized, the boys took an unconscious step forward, drawn to the incredible sight. But Jason, snapping out of his reverie, grabbed Kyle's arm.

"We have to go back," he urged, his voice low and urgent.

Reluctantly, Kyle nodded in agreement. Holding a wriggling Jack, the brothers carefully picked their way back out of the fog, emerging into the warm sunlight of their backyard.

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"You were right, what we saw now looks a lot like the lights of a big city", said Kyle.

"Yeah, that was a little scary", Jayson answered him.

"Scary? Common, dude, the lights of unknown big city from the future in the forest mist, what could be scary about that?"

Kyle had already recovered from what he saw. Turning, Jason lightly kicked his brother in the shoulder and smiled.

As they headed inside, the twins were already formulating a plan.

"As soon as Mom and Dad leave for their party tonight, we'll try to connect to the future internet again," Jason said, his eyes gleaming with anticipation.

Kyle grinned, equally excited by the prospect.

"And this time, we'll both have avatars to explore with."

With renewed determination, the brothers went about their day, counting down the hours until they could once again delve into the incredible world that lay just beyond the mist.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **Marvels and Mysteries**

THE moment the front door clicked shut behind their parents, Jason and Kyle raced up the stairs, taking them two at a time in their eagerness to reach their rooms. They quickly booted up their computers, fingers drumming impatiently on their desks as the screens flickered to life.

"This is it," Kyle thought, his heart pounding. "Time to find out more."

However, connecting to the mysterious "Internet from the mist" proved to be more challenging than they anticipated. The strange network didn't appear right away, forcing the boys to reboot their systems several times before the ethereal connection finally stabilized.

As the otherworldly interface materialized on their screens, Jason and Kyle exchanged a quick message, agreeing to have their avatars meet up at a designated spot near Millennium Park in the futuristic Chicago. There were still countless questions swirling in their minds about the incredible sights they had witnessed during their last virtual excursion.

Jason, having already gone through the scanning process, found himself once again embodying his digital doppelganger. He maneuvered his avatar to the agreed-upon meeting place, a sleek silver bench beneath a towering holographic art installation.

As he waited for Kyle to complete the creation of his own virtual alter ego, Jason's avatar took in the breathtaking surroundings. The park was alive with activity, even more so than the last time he had seen it. Hovercraft zipped overhead, their aerodynamic forms glinting in the sunlight that filtered through the gaps between the

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soaring skyscrapers. Augmented reality displays danced across the facades of nearby buildings, advertising products and services beyond Jason's wildest imagination.

Just as Jason's avatar was about to sit down on the bench, a figure came into view, striding purposefully towards him. As it drew closer, Jason realized with a start that he was looking at a perfect digital replica of his twin brother.

Kyle's avatar grinned as he approached, his appearance nearly indistinguishable from Jason's own virtual form, save for the color of his clothing.

"Dude, this is insane!" Kyle's voice emanated from the avatar, filled with the same mix of excitement and disbelief that Jason felt.

The two virtual brothers clasped hands in a brief, awestruck greeting, marveling at the uncanny sensation of touch in this digital realm. Around them, the futuristic cityscape pulsed with life, inviting them to explore its.

"So, where do we start?" Kyle's avatar asked, his eyes wide as he took in the astonishing sights.

Jason's digital counterpart glanced around, his gaze settling on a particularly impressive skyscraper that seemed to defy the laws of physics with its twisting, organic shape.

"I say we start there," he suggested, pointing towards the architectural marvel.

"And work our way through the park, seeing what else we can discover."

With a shared nod of agreement, the two avatars set off.

"I can't believe this is happening," Jason thought. "It's like we're living in a sci-fi movie."

As Jason and Kyle's avatars strolled through the futuristic Millennium Park, their digital faces mirrored the absolute delight felt by their real-world counterparts. The park was a dazzling showcase of technological wonders, each sight more astonishing than the last.

"Dude, are you seeing this?" Avatar Jason exclaimed, gesturing towards a small street cafe that caught their attention.

Its holographic menu items slowly rotated within translucent