

Jax the Time Traveler

Jax never meant to land in 1912. He'd been aiming for a quiet corner of 2304, but his jump-drive coughed, wheezed, and spat him out onto a fog-soaked street that smelled like coal smoke and wet wool.

The first thing he saw was a kid—maybe twelve—balancing on a crate outside a bakery, stretching to hang a crooked *HELP WANTED* sign. The kid squinted at Jax's strange jacket.

"You from the circus?" he asked, not unkindly.

Jax glanced down at his glowing wrist console. "Sure," he said. "Let's go with that."

The boy shrugged, hopped off the crate, and offered him a half-burned roll. "If you're lost, people usually end up by the river. Something about it makes folks think clearer."

Jax didn't believe in rivers as spiritual guidance counselors, but he followed anyway—because his jump-drive was fried, and because the kid walked like someone who'd already seen too much for twelve.

At the riverbank, steamships hissed, gulls screamed, and the water slapped against stone like it was trying to get someone's attention. Jax knelt, popped open the drive, and immediately burned his thumb. The kid winced in sympathy.

"What's that thing for?" he asked.

Jax considered lying, decided against it. "Going home."

The kid was quiet for a long moment. Then he said, "Everyone around here wants that, but none of them got a machine for it."

Jax didn't know what to do with that, so he handed over the ruined roll. The kid tore it in half and gave the bigger piece back without comment.

Somehow, that made fixing the drive easier. The wiring still fought him, but twenty minutes later, it hummed with a shaky little spark of life.

The kid's eyes widened. "So... you're really leaving."

"Yeah." Jax hesitated. "You gonna be okay?"

The kid gave a lopsided grin. "Nobody here ever is. But we still keep going."

Jax pressed a small metal chip into the kid's hand—a broken stabilizer, useless to him but shiny enough to feel like a gift.

Then he stepped into the flickering jump-field. The last thing he saw before the world dissolved was the kid holding the chip up to the gray light, studying it like a treasure.

Jax wasn't sure if he'd landed back home when he opened his eyes. The room looked right, but something in him felt different—like he'd brought a piece of that riverbank forward with him.

Turned out even time travelers couldn't leave every place they visited. Some places left a mark.