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**“Killing Jack Bennett”**

**12<sup>th</sup> Grade**

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## **Killing Jack Bennett**

The light shimmers as the time ray fades and there it is—the huge gate with dozens of people milling around it. You turn to your partner, Wes, and give him a onceover, nodding with satisfaction as you decide that the dark brown hair and flamboyant t-shirt will help him fit right in with the crowds at the zoo.

“You ready?” he asks, grinning and tucking a hair behind your ear. You give him a look that hopefully conveys the determination you’re feeling as you steel yourself for this mission.

“Let’s do this.”

They’re standing by the gate—easy to see. You walk up to their mother and smile convincingly as her eyes light up.

“Rachel! I was beginning to think you’d forgotten!”

“Sorry I’m late, Mrs. Bennett,” you say apologetically. “The traffic was bad.” Glancing at the three kids who are watching you eagerly, you add, “Ready to go?”

All three of them nod excitedly, and you can’t help but stop and stare.

Because they’re dead.

Jana, the oldest girl, is holding the hand of her younger brother Finn. She looks fresh and clean, although her mischievous eyes remind you that she’s likely to find some trouble to get into if you look away for five seconds, and Finn is busily scuffing his shoes on the sidewalk and singing under his breath.

And then there’s Jack, Jana’s twin. It takes your breath away to look into his eyes and see in your mind, hovering over that seven-year-old cherub face and innocent brown gaze before you, a thirty-year-old dictator who kills people with a snap of his fingers, so to speak.

You can barely tear your eyes away from him to hear what their mother is saying about being back in three hours to pick them up.

The plan is perfect—you and Wes have successfully taken out the babysitter and altered your appearance so that you could be taken for her twin. The Elders debated for an age before agreeing to go through with this—they don't know how success of the mission will affect the future—but at last the time has come, and Mrs. Bennett is hugging her children and walking away.

You take them into the zoo. Jana wants to see the elephants. Jack wants the lions. Finn doesn't seem to want to do anything but sing under his breath and hold your hand with his sticky one, and smile at you. He's only five—he doesn't care what animals they see as long as they're real ones. You assure him they are. You wonder if he cried when Jana died.

Wes stays a few meters away, but follows closely. It isn't as though Jack Bennett, at seven, could hurt you, a young adult who has been trained for combat and assassination, but Wes likes you and told the Elders flat out, when this mission was brought up, that when it came to Jack Bennett, he didn't want to take any chances.

The kids watch the elephants' show. You watch Jack. His face is mildly interested, but he turns to Jana to ask her questions instead of watching the trainer explain. He loves his sister. You can see it in his eyes. By now they're both sweaty, and although Jana's hair is still hanging loose and neat down her back, Jack's is ruffled and sticking up everywhere. Just like any other kid.

You jerk at the thought and shake your head. Because Jack Bennett is not just any other kid. He's a killer—a heartless monster who destroyed and destroyed until the world cried out in

anguish. Seeing him like this...perhaps it wasn't such a good idea. But how can one destroy a destroyer unless one gets to it before it is capable of conceiving such destruction as it will someday bring about?

It is at the lion's exhibit that you see the first signs of inhumanity in that innocent little boy's face. His expression is rapt with attention as he watches the tawny beast stretch and shake its mane, although it does not rise. You wonder why he is so attentive—surely it would be a better show if the beast stood and roared, or attacked one of the others.

You ask him. Jack looks at you with surprise, and says, simply, "He doesn't need to roar or fight. He's so strong he doesn't have to."

"But now all he does is lie around," you reply, trying to see through his logic. "What good does that do him?"

"He already did his fighting," says that sweet, childish voice. "He killed until they let him be the King of Beasts, and now he doesn't have to be fierce anymore. He's already conquered everybody."

And you shiver, because he's right.

"Of course," Jack adds, thoughtfully, "it isn't nice of them to keep him in a cage. I wouldn't like to be in a cage—not if I was strong like him."

"What if you weren't strong?"

"Then I'd hate it more," he replies. "And I'd grow strong, so I could break out. And then I would make them pay."

Something flashes through his eyes—something cold and caustic and inhuman and frighteningly familiar—familiar because the last time you saw it was on the mug shot at the

prison when he was incarcerated, some thirty years in the future. And the thought that was growing slowly in your mind that maybe, just maybe, you and Wes have gone back to the wrong year and found the wrong Jack Bennett...well, the thought no longer exists. You study him carefully and imagine him at eight, at twelve, at nineteen. When was it that the simple thought in the mind of a child morphed into a vision of world domination, destruction, and ruling by fear? Your hand trembles on the railing, because you're so close. It would only take one push—for the wall drops away on the other side of the exhibit, and it would be over quickly and painlessly.

But you don't, because he turns to you with those bright eyes and smiles and says, "I want to see the tiger now," and with Jana and Finn chiming in with voices shrill with excitement, you nod mutely and lead them away.

Wes looks worried. He stands behind you in the line for snowcones and whispers, while the kids aren't paying attention, "What's taking so long?"

"I'm waiting for the right moment," you tell him sharply. But you can see in his eyes that he knows the real problem.

"You can't let this throw you. He burned our homes —murdered our families—released a plague on the world that slaughtered millions. We're here to stop that."

"I know!" you snap. "I know!"

There are so many ways you could do it—you're carrying a blaster, poison darts, an old fashioned shiv-blade strapped to your arm. The lion's exhibit was certainly not the most dangerous of execution grounds the zoo is offering, either, for a tumble into the alligators' hole could end in drowning or at a snap from their crooked, jagged smile. And yet, when it comes to

the moment (or moments) of truth, you just can't. You can't look into those adoring brown eyes and shove him over the edge, or drive something up between his ribs. You can't bear to think what the other two might do, staring at their fallen sibling with wide, terrified eyes and mouths gaped in silent screams. They'll look that way someday, of course—when their own brother orders his men to gun them down. And you wonder, deep down, that if the heartache and terror they would experience now would result in their lives being saved later, then *why not?*

But you can't. At last you give up. After watching Jack gently take a bird on his finger and feed it with the food they're selling at three times its value, you stifle a sob and stalk over to Wes.

"Let's go home."

He stands from the bench where he's been resting and gives you a mystified look.

"Home? But what about--"

"I can't," you say, and the words seem to come from the deepest part of your soul. "I can't murder a kid in cold blood."

"Bennett would—will," Wes reminds you, coldly. "You'll be saving him from all that too."

"I can't." You repeat the words and wish they didn't sound so desperate. "I'm leaving."

"Lor—"

His words crackle into nothingness as you press the button on your belt and vanish. But you don't go back to the Elders' Assembly—not now that you've failed. They'll be sending troops after you, soon enough, even though Wes is sure to finish the job for you. But for now

you're in your room, staring at the picture of your older brother when he was seven—brown eyes, brown hair, and a smile like the one you were looking at seconds ago.

He's dead now. They're all dead, and you will be too. Like Jack Bennett, whom the Elders have ordered murdered in his childhood, so that the atrocities he will bring about as a twenty-something rebel will never come about. Even though they do not know how his death might affect the now, the present, and the future, anything would be better than Bennett's Plague.

At least, that's what they have decided. But you know differently. You know that killing Jack Bennett at seven-years-old would not have saved—will not save the world.

Because the end of days is not an explosion or a plague or any other destruction capable of obliterating all life on earth. You know better than that, now. The end of days is coming to a point in which humans are without humanity, in which any means will justify the ends—in which the people elected to leadership for their wisdom would authorize the murder of a tyrant in his youth, because they can find no other way to escape the consequences of letting him grow up.

And now that you've reached that point, you understand that maybe the end of life, when it reaches such a stage, is not such a bad thing after all.