

Jared Gives Blood

"Jared!"

The voice called out in enthusiasm, even eagerness, but Jared didn't seem to hear. He did pause mid-stride, run his fingers through his disheveled hair and glance around at nothing in particular, hand on head. Jared returned to his pacing, tracing no certain pattern on the floor, but he appeared to be attempting to matt down the rest of the church's aging carpet outside the fellowship hall. He began mumbling undistinguishable words and rubbing his arms in a sort of self-hug. His forehead was wrinkled and starting to perspire.

Come on, Jared, he said to himself. Just go in. Do it. Your friends did it; you can do it. Just go. You've been skulking out here, hem-hawin' around for nearly twenty minutes. Go. In.

In truth, this was actually progress for Jared. Last time he'd come to the blood drive, the wafting alkali smell of blood hit him as soon as he entered the hallway that led to the fellowship hall which had been turned into a donor station. He'd taken two, three steps and then nausea and dizziness took him like the criminals they are, and threw him to the ground.

Ugh. That smell. Just thinking about it reanimated his sense of smell... and alerted his stomach that nausea and dizziness were watching and waiting from the next room. He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand to loosen the hair that was beginning to stick there.

"Jared," came the voice again. "What're you doing?"

Jared jerked himself around and was facing his roommate, Jonathan.

"Uh. Yeah," he fumbled out, still without really looking at anything or anyone. "Twas brillig, and the slithy toves/ did gyre and gimble wabe."

"*Huh?*" Jonathan asked, but not really surprised at the non sequitur of an answer to his question. Jared was often tracking thoughts in the forest of his mind; likely, he'd started to clear trails through there, though Jonathan doubted if Jared walked the same trail twice. Well, at least this time he knew the reference Jared was making. Lewis Carroll is an obvious favorite of one whose imagination was a little less tangled than his capacity to reason in any sort of a straight line. Jonathan couldn't remember the next line, not exactly, so he smiled broadly and responded with what he could remember: "Beware the Jabberwock, my son!/The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!"

At this, Jared looked right at his friend, with what passed for focus, and without hesitation called to him, "Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun/ The frumious Bandersnatch!" No smile cracked Jared's face when he said it, as was usually the case when he would stride down the halls of Dillinger Dorm rattling off the nonsensical whimsy of *Through the Looking Glass* in a makeshift British accent.

Jonathan drew back. "What's wrong, man? You look—you seem... I don't know... *agitated.*" Jonathan stood in his typical easy way, as he looked at Jared. He put his hands in his pockets and rattled his keys. His shirtsleeves were carelessly turned up to the elbow. A blue piece of elastic tape trailed out from beneath one of the rolls. Jared glanced at the tape and then through the doorway, into the dull room that streamed with suicidal florescent lights.

"Uh. Nothing," he responded quietly, and then, as if in passing, as if his thoughts articulated themselves without his will, "The Bandersnatch," he said under his breath. "*Why?*" He turned back to his friend, "What are you guys doing?"

By this time, Jude had walked up. She slipped her arm through Jonathan's and was leaning into his shoulder with her own. Jared thought he saw Jonathan wince at this. "Hiya, Jared," Jude

said with all kinds of her typical enthusiasm. Jude had a way about her that disarmed Jared, put him at ease. He wanted to confess. She just seemed so *familiar*; she would understand. And though she was nearly twenty-one, she hadn't lost her simple curiosity, nor the hypnotizing charisma of her youth. She was nowhere near the slough where others with such charisma and charm set up shop and wait to become salesmen or televangelists. She wasn't really hard to figure out; it was just hard to figure out how someone could be so easy-going, so careful and yet carefree, so... *affable*.

Jared had met Jude a couple years before and had liked her instantly. She was Jonathan's girlfriend, true, but the three spent nearly all their free time together. Jared had his theories about how she came to be so "genial" (as he often called her), but the forest of his mind—well, as said before—had few orderly pathways through. With Jared, you had to take his speculations and explanations with a bit of salt and lemon. Or sugar. Then you had to round the superlative, squinch your eyes, and multiply "I'm not buying that" to the second power. And he was often still right about his conclusions, despite his non-sequential bushwhacking trails of reasoning. In Jude's case, he presumed that somehow she entered awesome land in the personality department because her parents spelled her name J-U-D-E—like that book in the Bible—but they pronounced it "joo-dee," like Judy Bloom or Judy Garland. Or Judy Moody. Spelled like a guy name; pronounced like a girl name. But somehow she pulled it off, despite the mild chagrin of every first day of every new class and the teachers' inevitable mispronouncing of her name. She pulled it off and it shaped her, or so Jared figured.

But Jared didn't think of any of this now. He was not put at ease by Genial Jude. He could barely speak. "H-Hi, Jude," he managed to stammer. It came out about as friendly as a giraffe,

preferring to slop away at zoo-provided sludge rather than entertain squalling, dirty-faced children. Or Jude the genial.

"Jarod. You okay?" Jude's eyes and smiling mouth slackened into a look of concern. "You don't look so—you look *ill*." She dropped Jonathan's arm and took a step toward Jared. Jared flinched back—he hoped imperceptibly—when Jude put her hand to his forehead. She didn't seem to mind the cool, clammy moisture or the wild hairs sticking to his forehead like mosquitoes on flypaper. She just gave her diagnosis: "Well, you're jittery. Your skin is paler than usual. Your lips are dry. Your voice is going hoarsey on you." She glanced back at Jonathan and winked, and then finished her observations: "And your skin is soft and supple like a baby's cheek!"

Jared's eyes snapped back on Jude's. While she was reciting his ailments, he had dropped his hands to his side and taken a kick at the carpet with the toe of his worn out Converse. "What?" he managed to say. "What did you say?"

"I said, 'You're jittery. Your skin is paler than usual. Your lips are dry. Your voice is going hoarsey on you.'"

"Oh," Jared murmured.

Jude continued. "And, I said, 'Your skin is soft and supple like a baby's cheek!'" She was positively grinning—that infectious grin she could give that would cause her eyes to nearly squint all the way shut.

Jared stared back at her, a blank expression on his face. His eyes were flat. Jude waited. Jared leaned his face right into hers and said in a mixed pirate and British accent, "Aye, so it is! 'And, hast thou slain the Jabberwock?/ Come to my arms, my beamish boy!'" He squeezed Jude in a

bear hug, pushed her back from him and, holding her at arms' length, called out, "Thou *hast* slain the Jabberwock!"

Jared clapped her on the arm, turned, and paraded into the dull room with the anemic fluorescent lights. He didn't notice that Jude had winced at his clap, that tears were welling up and threatening to leak her pain. He was back to his euphoric self. His skin and lips had recovered. He was re-invigorated. The Jabberwock was slain and he would do it. He marched past the attendants with clipboards and right up to the big reclining chair. With a plop he was seated and rolling up his sleeves.

What looked like a giant of a man to Jared, dressed all in forest green (or so it looked in the death-light of this room), ambled over and sat astride a stool beside Jared's chair. "You ready?" he asked in a voice Jared swore was the first cousin of the howling of the stray cats that stalked their prey behind his apartment complex.

But Jared's voice was gone. His arm went limp as the not-so-jolly green giant wrapped a rubber tube around his arm. From his coffin-chair, Jared could see into the hallway. Jonathan and Jude were looking in at him, wan smiles on their faces. They were holding hands and... yes, they had blue bands around their arms. Blue *bandages*. Jared looked back at the hulk beside him, who was now holding a needle in his hand that could easily pass for an arrow on the bow of a typical sized man.

Jared's eyes went wide as the cookies there for those that made it through the "donation." He gasped out, "the Bandersnatch—the frumious Bandersnatch—"

And then, just before he blacked out, before the room fell into a flurry of revival, his eyes deepened, widened and then squinted. It was as if he were living a just-before-falling-into-sleep dream. And, like such dreams, all the potential knowledge, understanding, enlightenment that

teeters on the point between consciousness and subconsciousness but is gone like vapor upon waking, eluded Jared. He was so close to being settled but it was out there past the deepening hole of his fainting vision. *They gave it*, he thought as he struggled to keep his eyes opened. And then, in a whisper just barely audible, he lamented, “one, two... one, two... through and through—the vorpal blade... am *I* Jabber—”