

Howdy.

Ah'm Jefferson Davis Breckenridge. Most folks call me, "J.D." Please t' meet ya.

Ah'm a private investigator. Well, ah was. Worked for th' FBI, for th' Empress of Dragons, an' for gov'ment agencies that ah wasn't allowed t' know th' name of.

Ah've got a talent, or more like a curse that ah've learned t' make use of. Ah kin know where anybody is, s'long as ah know their full name at birth. Ah speak their name, an' with a little will, Ah kin be where they are, no matter where. Makes me pretty useful as a man tracker, or doin' hostage rescue.

Why? Not sure. Has somethin' t' do with m' Daddy, an' th' Gullyhooter. Y'all aren't th' sort t' know about th' Gullyhooter, or if y' have, y' don't believe. Well, ah believe, an' have since ah was eight years old.

Y'see, ah've worked for him, too. Th' Gullyhooter, ah mean.

We lived deep in th' wet, poor as possums. m' Daddy was a drunk, a drug addict, an' one mean sumbitch. His answer t' any problem was t' get drunk, or get high, or slap an' kick me 'round th' trailer 'til ah stopped movin'. Usual that it was all three, ah recall.

Never knew m' Ma. There were women about now an' then, but none of them much use t' me.

But he was sumpthin' else, too. He was a swamp doctor. Folks called him a "he-witch." There was always herbs an' skins an' pieces of things around. There was old books, black an' heavy that ah was not allowed t' touch, or even t' look at. Jars of parts of things ah couldn't recognize, an' worse, things ah could. He was always burnin' somethin', or mutterin' some strangeness, or comin' in late at night covered in dirt, eyes shining. An' he could make things happen.

He could curse people, an' make 'em die. Ah saw it more than once. He could make somebody's hand wither, black an' brittle. He could call t' packs of wild things that'd come, an' do as he said.

But he messed with th' Gullyhooter, an' that was th' end of it.

He'd been laborin' over his magic day an' night. Workin' on comin' up with a way t' call th' Gullyhooter, an' make 'im mind his orders. Daddy said that if he could do that, we'd be rich as Rockefellers, cause no one could stop him takin' anything he wanted. No bullet or blade, nor any weapon of man could stop th' Gullyhooter, so he said. An' when he'd broke th' Gullyhooter, he was gonna make a lotta folks pay in blood for disrespectin' him.

He'd been awake for seven days, livin' on whiskey an' enough meth t' kill any three men. th' trailer stank with plants he kept burnin' day an' night, worse than when he was cookin' crystal. Five days in, th' worst storm ah'd ever seen started shakin' th' walls, makin' th' ceiling ripple an' pop. It went on an' on, bigger n' bigger an' Daddy kept gettin' louder n' louder, wavin' his arms in th' air like he's having a spasm.

Then, late, late at night on th' seventh day, th' thunder an' th' wind, an' th' beating rain stopped. Sudden, like somebody turned off a switch. It was quiet for a breath or two. Then, there was a sound.

Ah don't know how t' tell of it. It was a cave in deep in a dark mine. It was thunder. It was a voice,

something between a growl, a scream an' a howl. It was so loud that you could feel it on your face, in your chest.

Ah looked at Daddy. He was smilin' but not like happy. More like somebody stretched too little face across too much skull. He looked at me, an' his eyes weren't like eyes anymore, more little pieces of night, with more night behind them. For just a flash, he looked at me in a way that he never had before that ah could recall. He looked like he was concerned for me.

“Don' go out,” he said, his voice stretched thin an' sharp as a cutter wire. “Don' look at it, or it'll scare th' soul right out of y'. Don' look.”

He started toward th' door. ah closed m' eyes an' heard him open it. ah heard his step on th' porch. Then, there was another voice, a gurgling scream, like someone drowning, like someone bein' torn apart deep under water.

Ah stood there, m' eyes closed tight as a child kin. Ah closed them so hard ah saw flashes, swirling behind m' eyelids.

An' then, it was there in th' trailer with me. Ah could smell it. It was wet dog. Open grave. Rottin' pig. Vomit. Blood. ah could feel that it was there. Ah knew it was inches from me.

Ah don't know if it was th' sheer terror that froze me, or something else, but ah did not move. Ah did not open m' eyes. Ah waited for something horrible t' happen. An' it did.

It touched me. Not with a hand, or a claw, not in a way you feel with your nerves an' your skin. It was suddenly all over me, inside me, pullin' me apart, rippin' muscle from bone, tearin' m' heart from m' chest, boilin' m' brain in m' skull like a kettle, breakin' every bone, flayin' every inch of skin off m' body, all in an instant.

Then, there was a voice. It was soft, an' high an' quiet, inside m' skull.

It said, “hunt...for...me.”

Th' growlin', screamin', yowlin' thunder burst from somewhere. Inside me and outside. It sent nails an' glass an' hot sand hammerin' through m' skull. Then, ah was gone.

Ah woke up deep in th' woods, naked an' wet. Ah shivered. There was a taste in m' mouth. A horrible taste of metal an' sulfur an' decay. Ah finally opened m' eyes.

In th' dim light of just 'fore dawn, ah could see th' trees around me, covered six feet up with blood. Ah was covered in blood. th' ground was covered in blood an' bits of somethin'.

There was a hand layin' alone. Ah recognized it. th' back of it had been across m' face often enough.

Ah half-crawled, half-walked towards anywhere but there. Th' rain was smashing down through th' leaves. Every shambling step was pain, every thought was jagged fear, refusing t' be shaped into anythin'.

Ah suppose th' cold an' wet got me. Next ah remember ah was in th' hospital. They'd cleaned me up.

There was a doctor, an' a cop there, but Daddy tole me t' never t' talk t' doctors, cops or preachers. No good kin come of it. Ah didn' say word one.

Ah bounced from foster t' foster for some time after. Problem was that every now an' then, sometimes a month, sometimes six months, sometimes a year or two, ah'd turn up naked an' covered in blood, out in th' sticks somewheres. Didn't much matter what they did, they'd lock me up, sit on me, didn' matter at all. They'd look away for a tick, an' ah'd be gone. They tried all sorts of ways t' make me tell what happened, but in honest truth, ah didn' know. Ah'd be somewheres, an' then somewheres else. Unstrung m' warders somethin' awful, an' they passed me on as soon as they could manage it.

Things woulda turned out different if ah hadn't grown so big. By th' time ah was fourteen, ah was over six feet tall, an' wider at th' shoulder than most full grown men. Don't know how ah got so big. m' Daddy wasn't anythin' like what ah was growin' into. A football coach spotted me, an' decided that not much else about me mattered. Ah took t' it, an' t' school, an' things sure did change.

It was 'bout then that ah discovered what ah could do. Ah got a crush on a girl, but she moved away. Her Daddy was a soldier, an' th' whole family moved hundreds of miles off, t' a new base. Ah was layin' in m' bed in m' foster, wonderin' where she was, what she was doin'.

An' suddenly, Ah knew.

Ah knew just where she was. Down t' th' foot, an' in which direction. Ah missed her, wanted t' be with her. An' suddenly, ah stumbled out her bedroom closet door, more'n six hundred miles from where ah'd been one heartbeat b'fore.

She screamed for sin an' murder, an' her Daddy was madder than a wet wasp nest, but th' coach got me back t' school. An' a'course, t' football practice.

Ah kept growin'. By soph'more year ah was six feet, six inches an' over two hundred an' eighty solid pounds. Ah did good at football, won championships, made all-state, an' other coaches started stopping by t' talk about m' future. M' grades were good. Ah kept on growin', an' more coaches, from bigger schools started comin' by.

Ah went t' college at th' University of Alabama on a full ride. Made starter at left tackle, year one. Kept studyin' an' making grades. Different sorts of coaches started showin' up t' practices.

Happiest days of m' life, proolly. By m' last season, ah was six foot, eight inches an' three-fifty. "Quick as light," they said. Called me a wonder. A "generational talent." They didn' have enough iron in th' weight room t' suit me. Graduated early, Summa cum laude. English Literature. Life started lookin' great, an' ah hadn' woke up naked in th' bushes for three years.

Then, in th' last game ah'd ever play, some bastard came in low on me. Ah felt m' knee tear itself apart, turn into a jelly of pain. Ah knew it was over before they hauled me off th' field. Ah'd never cried over Daddy, but ah cried for a week after that, an' not from th' pain.

When all th' surgery was over, an' th' doctor told me ah'd be lucky t' walk straight, much less play another down of football, ah figured it was all done. Had no idea what t' do. Ah didn' have money t' go t' grad school, an' without a doctorate, wasn't much chance a making a livin' outa a B.A. In English Lit. An' ah wasn't gonna be much use t' all those coaches that alla sudden forgot ah existed.

Ah was in rehab one day, an' ah saw a woman cryin'. There was always alotta cryin' goin' on in there, so 'twasn't that unusual a sight, but she was sittin' right on th' floor, cryin' like ah hadn' seen anybody cry ever before.

Ah asked her what was wrong, an' she looked at me in a way that struck me right in th' deepest part of m' stomach. She explained that her daughter had gone missing. She didn' know where or how. Th' police didn' seem much help, figured she'd run away, an' would come back when she was ready. But this woman said she knew her girl, an' she wouldn' do that. She kept sayin' it again an' again.

Ah asked her daughter's name. By then, ah knew what ah could do. She told me. Ah thought on it for a second, an' told her that her daughter was three hundred an' twelve miles, six hundred an' thirty feet, seven inches thataway. Ah pointed.

She looked at me as if ah were stone crazy. She asked how ah could know that. Ah just told her that ah knew.

Three days later, she was back at th' rehab gym. She half-ran up t' me, an' told me that her girl had been found. Some boy had talked her into going away with him for th' weekend, an' then locked her up when she tried t' come back. She'd hired a detective, who found her an' brought her home.

She asked again how ah knew. Ah told her that ah just did. She tried t' give me money. Ah told her it hadna cost me anythin', an' ah was glad her daughter was home safe.

She musta got th' word out, cause over th' next few weeks, people started comin' t' ask me where people were. Ah told them, but ah learned somethin' else. Ah can't find th' dead. Anybody livin' ah kin find. But th' dead are beyond m' gift.

Ah started acceptin' money when it was offered. An' sometimes, it was a lot of money. 'Fore long, I had th' money I needed for grad school.

One day, a man came t' my apartment. He was dressed in a suit. Showed me a badge. Said he was a Special Agent. He asked me where someone was. Ah told him. He stood there, quiet for a moment, an' then asked me if ah'd like t' serve my country in a way nobody else could.

They took me t' a place out West. Deepest nowhere, from what ah could tell. Lots of fences, barbed wire, an' very serious lookin' soldiers. They put me in a comfortable room, an' every day, they gave me a list of names. Didn' tell me who they were, but ah really didn' need t' know. Some of th' names were foreign looking – Arabic, Russian, Chinese, but that didn' matter. Ah knew where they were, all th' same. Ah tried askin' what this was for, but they tol' me that I didn' need t' know. Ever' now an' then, they'd tell me ah was doin' great work, makin' th' world safer. For awhile, ah left it at that.

They started givin' me tests, took lots of blood, hooked me up t' instruments, had me find people while scanning m' brain. They said that they were tryin' t' keep me healthy, but ah didn' believe that. Never trust a doctor or a cop. There were plenty a both there. I told them thanks very much, but it was time for me t' move on. They said ah wasn't a prisoner, an' that ah could go th' next day if ah wanted t'. I said I did.

They doped m' dinner. Ah woke up handcuffed t' a hospital bed. They said ah'd had some sort a fit. Ah

didn't believe that for a minute. They gave me another list t' find, an' tol' me that ah'd be released if ah found all of 'em. After that, there was another list. An' another.

I guess they figured ah was too valuable an "asset" t' be let loose. Ah found out that other "assets" were there. A sour lookin' fella who could heal by touch. A girl who was taken everywhere wearing a blindfold an' headphones, always with women soldiers an' guards. They said she was death itself.

Then, one night, Ah heard th' screaming roar. An' ah woke up in th' woods naked, cold an' bloody, hundreds of miles away.

It wasn't hard t' stay ahead of them after that. All's ah needed was a name, an' I could be anywhere, steppin' out of th' nearest doorway t' whoever's name ah had. Ah did my best t' help where ah could, desperate people who were willin' t' pay for m' gift. Some who couldn't pay.

M' life took me t' many strange places. Ah met people, an' things that weren't people, an' worked with an' for an' sometimes against 'em. These stories are th' stories of those years. Ah met th' Empress of Dragons, th' Lord of th' Dead, an' th' Immortal Saint a' Swords. But this is all before that, before th' end.

An' now, these stories kin be told. Because somebody should know.

An' that's you.