

JACK TEMPLAR
MONSTER HUNTER

A NOVEL

By

Jeff Gunhus

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For my own little monsters:

Jackson, William, Daniel, Caroline and Owen

And for Nicole: who always smiles when she tells me to
go write.

My name is Jack Templar and I am an orphan.

Just before my fourteenth birthday, I discovered that I came from a long line of monster hunters. You know, vampires, werewolves, zombies, you name it.

Not only that, but if monsters around the world could choose one human to kill, it would be me. Why? I haven't a clue. I'd like to find out some day, but for right now, I'm happy just to stay alive.

WARNING

Yeah, you read it right. I'm a monster hunter. Back before I actually became one, I would have thought that sounded totally awesome. And don't get me wrong, in a lot of ways it is. But most of the time, I'm either running for my life or hiding in the shadows, praying the monster chasing me doesn't pick up my scent. And I'm almost always scared to death. In a few pages, I think you'll see why.

But there are a few things I need to warn you about before I tell you my story.

First, this isn't a cartoon. These are bloodthirsty creatures who will stop at nothing to kill. They are scary. Very scary. Second, the only way to stop them is to kill them first...and that gets gross and messy. Third, this is all real.

You think I'm kidding, don't you? I can almost see you smirking as you read this. But this isn't a joke. Monsters are real and the story I'm about to tell you really

happened. If you'd rather walk through life believing that monsters are only found in books or on the movie screen, then you should shut this book right now and go do something else.

I give you these warnings because the story I'm about to tell you isn't for everyone. Not everyone can handle it. The blood. The gore. The monsters.

This life was thrust onto me. I had no choice but to take up a sword and fight. But you can still walk away and pretend this dark world doesn't exist. Or you can walk through the door that I'm about to open and find out the truth about the world around you.

But I warn you (and this is a big warning), if you read this book, if you learn about the monsters that roam among us and the hunters who fight them, if you decide to learn the truth, then you will become fair game for the monsters to chase.

Make sure you understand what I'm saying.

If you read this book, you will be part of this world and the monsters will come after you too. You will start to see things that no other humans can see. The shadows will move when you walk near them. The creatures of the night will seek you out, testing the doors and windows of your house, looking for a way in.

And, at some point, they will find you, just like they found me, and you will be forced to defend yourself.

So, think carefully before you turn the page, because once you do, there's no turning back.

Ever.

Once a monster hunter, always a monster hunter.

See you on the other side.

If you're brave enough.

WARNING #2

OK, so looks like you were brave enough (or stupid enough) to ignore my warning. I would say congratulations, but that might imply that I think you made the right choice. Just promise that you won't say later that I didn't warn you.

See, I don't want you to be a big crybaby later on and complain to me that you can't fall asleep because of all the creepy-crawlies in your room. Or that it's my fault that a werewolf chewed off your left foot. Or that one of your eyes was plucked out by a harpy when you weren't looking.

I especially don't want any grief from your parents or from your teachers if you're too scared at night. I'm going to say it as simply as I can:

**THIS BOOK IS TOTALLY INAPPROPRIATE.
I'M SERIOUS. IT IS.**

If you think there's someone in your life who's not going to approve of you reading about monsters

eating people in gruesome ways, or of monsters getting killed in even worse ways, then I suggest you do one of two things:

- a) Don't read the book
- b) Hide the book and don't tell them you're reading it.

And whatever you do, don't let them read it. That would be the worse thing. Imagine if you started to read this book, then you got it taken away from you before you got done. You'd have monsters looking for you and you'd have no idea how to fight them. You'd be a sitting duck.

So, are we clear? No parents. No teachers. No crybabies.

If you're still in, turn the page and I'll tell you a story you're not going to believe.

Chapter One

Although I was born to be a monster hunter, for most of my life I didn't know any more about it than you do right now. I mean, I knew about monsters. Who doesn't? There are monsters on TV, in the movies, books, comics, you name it.

What I didn't know was that they are actually real and that dozens of them were secretly living in my small town waiting for me to turn fourteen...so they could kill me.

Yep, you heard me right. And not only kill me, but there were elaborate plans on how to do it in the most painful way possible. Fortunately, monsters tend not to be very creative, so I'm pretty sure that all their ideas were just different ways to eat me. But still, it's the principle of the thing. I mean, what had I ever done to them?

The day before my birthday was when I got the answer to that question.

It started like any other day. I woke up in a panic, realizing that I hadn't done my English homework. After this initial realization, I quickly moved from panic into guilt, then right into acceptance, and then finally back to sleep. (Don't judge me. I know you do the same thing.)

And that's the best sleep, too. Right during the time when you have to get up. I don't know if it's the same for you, but I dream a lot more during that sleep. And, on some days, I can control my dreams a little. I clearly remember my dream that morning. It was about Cindy Adams, the cutest girl in the whole school.

Come on! You can't fake me out that you're not into girls yet (or into guys if you're a girl awesome enough to be reading this book). So I don't want any "ewww...that's gross" comments during the love story parts of this book. Don't worry, there aren't that many. And some of them are super cool.

Anyway, like I was saying, this dream was about Cindy Adams, the cutest girl in school. In real life, the real Cindy Adams wouldn't give me the time of day. But in my dream, I walked right up to her, even though she was surrounded by a group of her girlfriends, and took her by the hand.

"Come on," I said. "We're hanging out together."

She smiled and nodded her head. Her friends stared as she held my hand and walked away. More

than just her friends, the whole school was watching. Cindy Adams was holding my hand like she'd been my girlfriend for years.

Once we were out of sight, I decided to try my luck. I stood in front of her, toe to toe, and leaned in for a kiss. She blushed, but didn't slap me, start laughing, or run away screaming. (All possible scenarios in my mind.)

She was going for the kiss. Leaning in. Eyes closed. Lips parted...to reveal a row of jagged, pointed teeth in her mouth!

I tried to step back, but she had me by the arms, her fingers digging into my skin. When her eyes opened, they glowed red. She snarled at me, her teeth growing longer, sticking out of her mouth. She pulled me to her to bite my throat, when...

I sat up straight in bed, yelling at the top of my lungs.

My Aunt Sophie came running into my room.

"What is it?" she said.

I lowered my hands from my neck, realizing that it had just been a dream. I was glad that no-one was trying to rip my throat out, but I was a little disappointed that I'd only imagined the whole Cindy Adams thing.

"Uh, nothing," I said. "Girl problems."

Aunt Sophie smiled. "You're turning fourteen tomorrow. That's when the real trouble starts. Come on. Breakfast is ready."

Aunt Sophie left and I dragged my lazy bones out of bed and into the bathroom. That's when I

noticed something strange. The kid in the mirror looked pretty much the same as yesterday, only...bigger.

I was the same height, but somehow overnight my muscles had grown larger. Not massive. I wasn't suddenly going to be mistaken for a bodybuilder as I walked down the street, but something had definitely changed. It's not that I looked like a wuss before, but there was nothing going on with my physique to brag about. But this morning? Whoa. I was looking good. I flexed for myself in the mirror, marveling at how my biceps formed into a big lump on my arm.

"That is so cool," I said to myself in the mirror.

Forgetting breakfast (not to mention my English homework), I pulled on my clothes and ran down to our basement where we had a weight bench. Aunt Sophie had gotten it for my last birthday, telling me that if there was ever a year when I wanted to work out and get stronger, this was it.

I had used it a little, but mostly it was just another place where we stored our basement junk.

I grabbed two forty-five pound plates and slid one on each side of the bar.

I eyed the bench press with those big weights on each side. The bar was another forty-five, making it one hundred and thirty-five pounds. No way. The most I had ever done before today was just the bar and twenty-five pounders, and that almost did me in after lifting it once.

Even though I was feeling strong, weirdly strong, I decided that I was being too optimistic. So I slid the forty-five pound plates off, replaced them with twenty-five pounders and lay down on the bench.

With a deep breath, I heaved the bar up, balancing it over my chest with locked arms. Slowly, I lowered it, half-expecting it to drop like a rock and crush me. But it didn't. I rested it on my chest for a second and then tried to push it back up. My arms shot up like there was no weight at all.

I smiled, and banged out five reps right in a row. No sweat.

I racked the weight and sat up, looking at my arms in wonder.

You know what I did next, right? I grabbed the forty-five pounders and put them back on. I lay on the bench, looking from side to side at the giant weights, having second thoughts. Then I decided to go for it.

I grabbed the bar, lifted it off the rack and, straining more than last time, I lowered it to my chest then raised it back up. Ten times.

"What are you doing down there?" Aunt Sophie shouted from upstairs.

"Coming!" I yelled as I racked the weight.

I felt my chest muscles, not sure what was happening to me. But liking it. Whatever was going on, I wasn't asking many questions. I decided to just go with it. Maybe this was what turning fourteen felt like.

"Jack Smith!" Aunt Sophie yelled.

I decided I would worry about it later. I ran upstairs and dug into the huge breakfast of bacon, eggs and toast that my Aunt Sophie had fixed. She poured me some juice and combed my unruly hair back with her fingers. She sat at the table, sipping her coffee, looking just a little sad. Even though I was jazzed about what had just happened, I was concerned.

“Anything wrong, Aunt Sophie?” I asked.

She shook herself out of her thoughts and smiled at me. “No, nothing wrong. Tell you what. Tonight’s your last meal before turning fourteen. You can have anything you want. What’s your pleasure?”

“Anything?” I asked.

“Anything.”

“Pepperoni and pineapple pizza from Papagallo’s and a giant bowl of mint chocolate chip ice cream,” I said.

“Really? I mean, even if it was your last dinner ever, that’s what you’d choose?”

I thought about that melted cheese in my mouth, the tangy red sauce, spicy pepperoni paired up with the burst of sweetness from the hot pineapple. Just thinking about it right now is making me hungry.

“Yep, that sounds perfect to me,” I said.

“Can I invite someone over?”

“I’d like it to be just the two of us tonight, is that OK?” Aunt Sophie said.

There was that sadness again. I stopped eating. “Are you sure you’re OK?” I asked.

She nodded, but tears welled up in her eyes. She grabbed a dish and took it into the kitchen. Sometimes, when she looked like that, I wondered if she was thinking about my dad. I always had to remind myself that when I lost my father, she also lost her little brother.

My dad had been a soldier, some kind of special branch of the Army or something. One day, according to Aunt Sophie, because I was too young to remember, some of his buddies knocked on our door with the news that my dad had been killed. It was some big Army secret how he had died. Aunt Sophie said she didn't know. But in the back of my mind, I wondered if she really did know and she was just keeping it from me.

I obsessed over my dad while I was growing up, always thinking of new ways that I could solve the mystery of his death. No matter how often Aunt Sophie asked me to leave it alone, I swore that when I got older, I would do everything I could to uncover the truth.

Don't get me wrong; I missed having a mom too. She died when I was born and all I have left of her is one photo taken from a distance. But I think having Aunt Sophie basically as my mother made it a lot easier. And she's awesome. She's into fishing, rough-housing, playing baseball. She even comes to all the father/son events at school where we beat the other teams at sports, showing up all the jock dads.

Still, even with Aunt Sophie, I grew up feeling the loneliness that only an orphan can feel. That aching sense that something that is supposed to

be there, just isn't. And worse, that it will never be. Into that empty hole, I put all my anger and my frustrations and I used it to focus me on the one thing I wanted more than anything else in life: to find out what really happened to my dad. It may not be true, in fact it's probably not, but part of me wants to believe that when I figure it out, the hole will go away and the loneliness will be gone forever. I can only hope.

OK. Enough of that. I don't want to make you think this story's going to be all mopey. Let's get on with it. I've got to tell you about the first monster I saw that day.

After gulping down enough food for three kids, I grabbed my book bag and ran out the door. The town of Sunnyvale was pretty rural. Our house was set back several hundred yards off the road and backed up to an old-growth forest. Trees lined our gravel driveway and our nearest neighbor was far enough away that you couldn't see another house until you got out to the main road.

Once at the end of the driveway, it was less than a quarter mile to school, so I could easily walk to class. Most days, I ended up running because I was late. I glanced at my watch. There was no way I was going to make it on time. I tightened my book bag straps and sprinted up the gravel driveway.

Just like when I was lifting the weights, something felt different. My legs were like springs, pounding out long strides as I ran. I was easily going twice as fast as normal. I pushed a little harder and

found that I had one more gear left and could go even faster.

I stopped when I reached the road, panting, but not tired. I looked behind me. A trail of dust hung in the air the length of the driveway, just like in a comic book when someone has gone super fast. I grinned. It was pretty cool.

I walked over to the first house on the street. It was empty and the lawn was overgrown with weeds, but it had a basketball hoop set up in the driveway. I slid my book bag off my shoulders and grabbed a ball half-covered in the tall grass.

I sized up the hoop. With a quick look around to make sure that no-one was watching, I bounced the ball a few times, then ran up to the hoop, jumped...and slam dunked it.

I'm not talking about barely getting over the rim and having the ball dribble in, either. I two-handed that bad boy into the hoop like I was an NBA all-star. The day before, I had only been able to get a handful of net with my best jump.

That was the first time I felt a little bit scared. Whatever was happening to me was happening in a big way. And it clearly wasn't normal. But, honestly, I didn't feel *that* scared. Mostly, I just felt totally awesome about it.

Even from a block away, I heard the first bell ring at my school. I grabbed my backpack and ran up the street, unaware that I was about to meet my first monster.