

TEAM HEARD

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Special thanks to Michael Ford For Lachlan Evans

ORCHARD BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2017 by The Watts Publishing Group

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 40834 351 7

Ebook ISBN 978 1 40834 352 4

Printed in Great Britain



The paper and board used in this book are made from wood from responsible sources

Orchard Books

An imprint of Hachette Children's Group

Part of The Watts Publishing Group Limited

Carmelite House, 50 Victoria Embankment, London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company

www.hachette.co.uk

www.hachettechildrens.co.uk

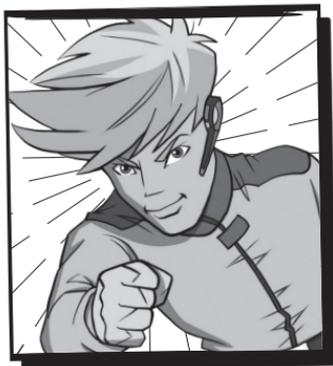
TEAM HEARD

ADAM BLADE



ORCHARD

MEET TEAM HERO...



JACK

POWER: Super-strength

LIKES: Ventura City FC

DISLIKES: Bullies

RUBY

POWER: Fire Vision

LIKES: Comic Books

DISLIKES: Small Spaces



DANNY

POWER: Super-hearing

LIKES: Pizza

DISLIKES: Thunder



***...AND THEIR GREATEST
ENEMY***



GENERAL GORE

POWER: Brilliant Warrior

LIKES: Carnage

DISLIKES: Unfaithful Minions

PROLOGUE



CLOUDS OF foul smoke filled the Great Cavern of Noxx. From the north wall, a river of lava fell, crashing into a fiery lake below. On a high viewing platform carved into a cliff, Bulk shifted in his leather tunic. He scratched his warty chin and watched his master smile cruelly.

“Training is going perfectly,” said General Gore.

Two warriors circled a giant armoured centipede in a fighting pit below. One was a man with the wings of a huge bat. His hands were deadly sharpened claws, his feet ragged talons. The other fighter was a living skeleton armed with a curved sword.

As the skeleton lunged with his blade, the centipede’s tail lashed and coiled around his middle. The crowd around the edges of the pit leaned in, chanting and shaking their fists as the centipede squeezed. But the bat soldier took his chance.



SNARRL!

He pounced, claws raised, landing on the centipede's head. The creature writhed, its shriek echoing around the cavern.

Bulk itched his hairless scalp and shuffled up closer to his master. "General, sir, would it not be better to rest our troops? Your troops, I mean?"

General Gore turned, his black cloak whipping round. He fixed Bulk with blazing red eyes that could have melted rock. "Did I ask for your advice?" he snarled.

"N ... n ... no, my lord," said Bulk, quivering.

"You are wise, Master," hissed a voice

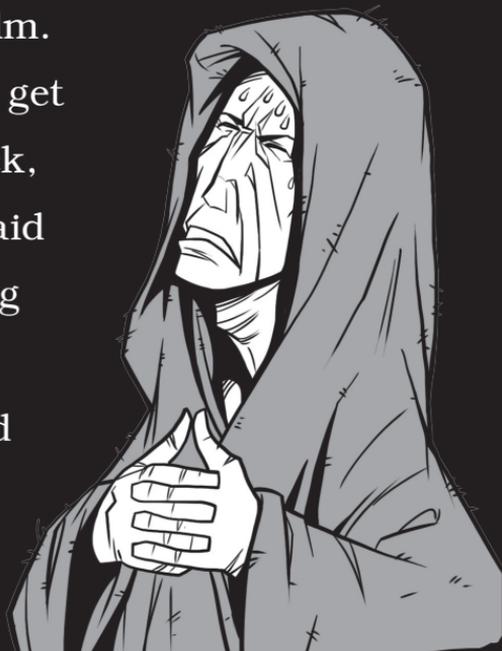
from the shadows. “How can you test their mettle properly unless they fight one another?”

Bulk shot a scowl at the other speaker. Smarm seemed almost to slide across the ground, stopping alongside General Gore with his hands clasped in front of him. He wore long robes of brown wool, his gaunt face barely visible under his hood. His hands glowed pale blue with magical energy.

“This time, we will not fail,” General Gore declared, driving one gauntleted fist into the palm of his other hand. “Their wretched world will fall at my feet.”

Bulk stared out across the vast cavern, where thousands of troops had gathered. Skeletons, bats and centipedes, all armed and ready to rise from Noxx onto the earth's surface – ready for vengeance against the human realm.

“And you can get your sword back, too, my lord,” said Smarm, nodding towards the empty scabbard that hung at General Gore's waist.



Their master's face twisted in rage – he didn't like to be reminded of the lost Shadow Sword. Bulk was pleased to see a bead of sweat trickle down Smarm's temple.

"Yes, slave," the general said. "I will reclaim what is mine." He raised his arms and bellowed across the cavern. "Enough!"

Silence fell. Every warrior looked up at him.

"I have waited down here in the dark for a thousand years," Gore shouted. "Last time, my forces let me down. But you will not repeat that mistake."

Bulk felt his weak heart racing.
“Are you ready for battle?” roared
his master.

The army raised their voices in a
savage cry, so loud Bulk felt the walls
of the cavern tremble. General Gore
flicked his visor down, his armour
flashing in the orange glow of the
lava falls, then strode away from the
platform.

Bulk gazed down at the massed
troops. *They certainly look impressive.*

But a thought wormed into his
head. “What about the prophecy?” he
muttered.

“Hmm?” said Smarm.

“You know,” said Bulk, more loudly. “*Darkness will rise and conquer light, unless the Chosen One joins the fight ...* Doesn’t that mean there is one human up there who can defeat us?”

A black shape moved quickly out of the darkness, and Bulk cried out as a gauntlet gripped him by the throat and hoisted him off his feet. General Gore. His eyes burning, Gore dangled Bulk over the edge of the platform.

“Please, my lord,” Bulk begged. “I only meant ...”

Gore’s fingers tightened so that Bulk couldn’t breathe. “The prophecy



means nothing,” he rasped. “It is a lie spread by the cowards of Hero Force. No human can defeat me!”

Bulk managed a strangled “Yes,

Master,” before General Gore tossed him back onto the platform and marched off.



CHAPTER 1



BEAK THE FREAK

“HEY, BEAK, are you cold or something?” shouted Ricky Evans.

Jack Beacon pretended not to hear. He walked at the back of the group, staring up at the soaring steel skyscrapers of Ventura City. Their windows reflected the bright sun like blazing mirrors.

“Yeah, take your gloves off, freak,” called Ricky’s friend Olivia.

Jack had heard it all before. He fought the urge to shout something back, remembering what his dad always said – *Just ignore them, Jack*. By the time they got to the City Museum, they’d be bored and the taunts would stop.

His teacher, Mr Parry, stopped to let Jack catch up with him. “Keep up, Jack,” he said, rolling his eyes.

“Yes, sir,” said Jack.

Besides, he was a freak. “Beak the freak”, as the bullies liked to chant. Even the doctors he’d seen couldn’t

explain what was wrong with his hands.

When they reached the road, the lights changed and Jack and Mr Parry had to wait. The rest of the class were already crossing the square towards the grand columns in front of the City Museum. As Jack watched them, he felt an odd prickle across his neck. Then he noticed someone on the bench opposite. A dark-skinned woman with striking purple hair was gazing right at him.

Jack turned away. He was used to people staring. She's probably wondering why I'm wearing gloves on

such a hot day.

A bus passed by. When Jack looked again, the woman had vanished.

Jack blinked a couple of times.

“Jack?” said Mr Parry. “We can go now.”

The lights had changed. Just as Jack stepped off the pavement, pigeons burst from the square in a cloud of panic and flapping feathers. The ground trembled beneath his feet.

An earthquake? Jack wondered, heart thudding. Another tremor shook the earth. Jack heard loud grinding and groaning sounds and struggled to stay upright. A man in a

suit tripped and fell. Jack leapt back as the pavement split open in front of him. A crack snaked down across the street, opening wide, so deep he couldn't see the bottom.

People were screaming with panic. A dog on a lead broke from its owner, barking madly. Ricky and Olivia were clutching one another. Jack heard car horns blaring and brakes screeching, the crunch of metal. Then a lorry swerved at speed, slamming into a taxi. Jack's breath caught in his throat as the taxi flipped right over onto its roof and mounted the pavement, spraying white sparks as it

slid across the square ...

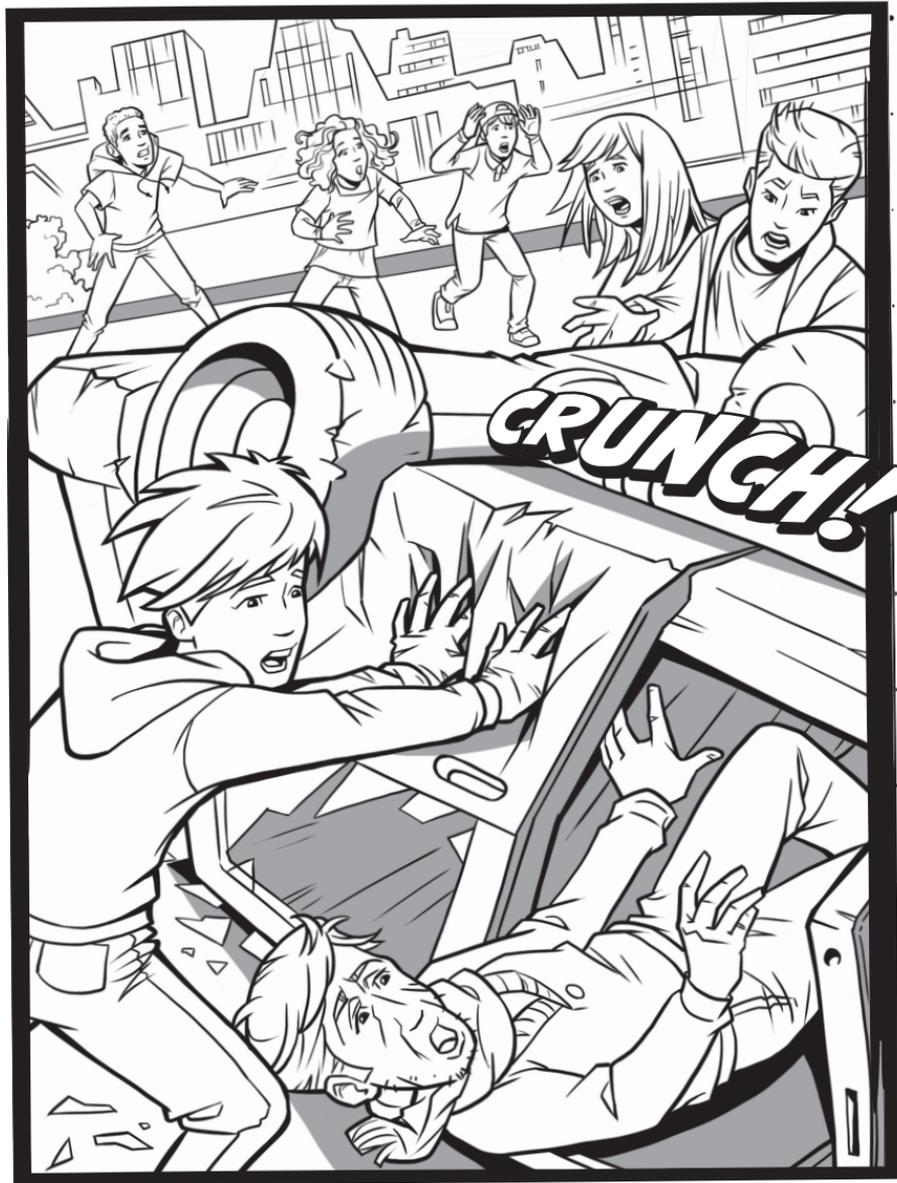
Straight towards Jack's class.

Without thinking, he threw himself in front of the oncoming car. He clamped his eyes closed and held out his arms. Someone screamed. Half a tonne of metal slammed into him ...

And stopped dead.

Jack opened his eyes.

His gloved hands were buried in the door of the taxi, fingers pressed into the metal. The smell of burned rubber filled his nose. The wheels were still spinning. The driver's door popped open, and a grizzled old man scrambled out, rubbing his head.



“You OK, lad?” he said, gasping.

Jack lifted his hands away, and saw the indented shapes of his fingers in the metal of the door. *What just happened?* He looked around him. His feet hadn’t moved an inch.

I stopped the car like I was catching a ball.

The earthquake had ended, leaving clouds of dust and a broken pipe spilling water across the street. Car alarms blared. People were crying.

“Did you see that?” cried Olivia.
“Beak stopped the car with his hands!”

Jack looked back to see all the

class, and everyone else in the square, staring in his direction. Mr Parry edged towards him, face pale. “Jack, are you hurt?” he asked.

Jack shook his head. He wasn’t injured at all. *But that’s impossible.* His hands felt hot. He peeled his gloves off, expecting to see the same rough scales he saw every morning before he dressed. His “lizard hands”, some kids called them.

But something had changed. His skin was glowing, gold and bright, like it was hooked up to an electric current.

“Whoa,” Ricky breathed. “Beak the freak!”

Jack pulled the gloves on quickly, backing away from the wrecked taxi. It didn't make any sense.

"Jack?" said Mr Parry. "What's going on?"

His teacher was open-mouthed, eyes darting from Jack's hands to his face. He looked afraid.

"I ... don't know," said Jack.

He just wanted to get away. The chant was pounding in his head.

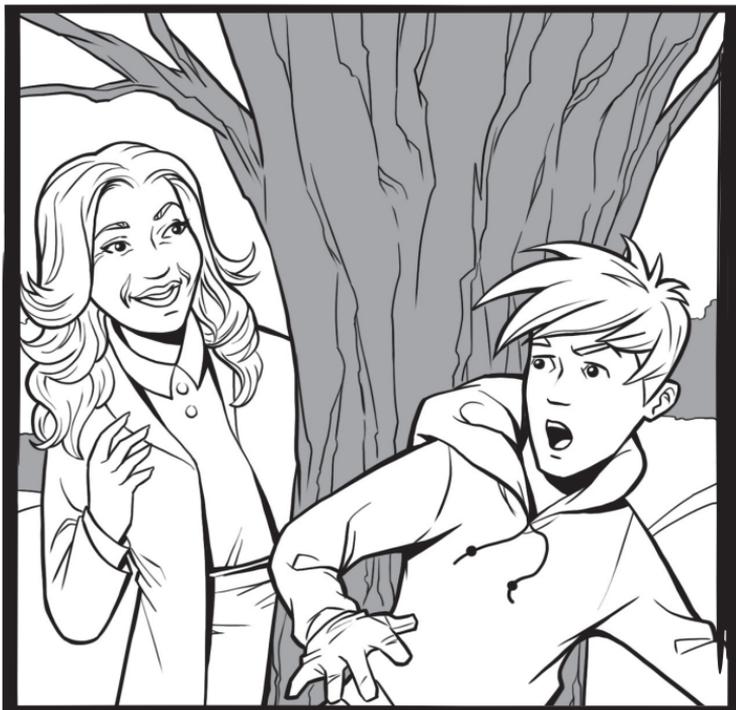
*Beak the freak. Beak the freak.
Beak the freak.*

Jack turned and ran, heading down a narrow passage between two shops. His feet carried him past

dustbins and fire doors. He reached a crossroads and ran over without looking, bursting through the gates of the City Park. He raced past the gardens and ponds and play areas until his chest burned. Finally, he sank down against a tree trunk. Around him, the whole city seemed to be spinning. Or maybe it was just his brain.

“That was rather impressive,” said a voice next to him.

Startled, Jack scrambled back up. The woman with purple hair was standing beside the tree, a knowing smile on her lips. That didn't make



sense either. He'd just sprinted, as fast as he could, from the City Museum. She had to be fifty years old at least. No way could she have kept up.

"How did you get here?" he asked.

Her smile broadened. "That's what I do," she said. "I get to places quickly."

Jack didn't know what to say to that.

"But I'm more interested in what you can do." She nodded to his hands. "That's why I was following you today."

Following me? He wondered if she was just a mad lady, but that didn't explain how she'd appeared out of thin air.

"Who are you?" he asked.

The woman held out her hand. "My name is Ms Steel, Jack," she said.

How does she know my name?

She didn't sound crazy, but he still wasn't sure he wanted to shake hands with her.

"I've got to get back to the museum," he said. "My teacher will be—"

Ms Steel cocked her head. "Jack, you won't be going back to school with Mr Parry."

Jack shivered. She spoke with complete authority, calm and certain.

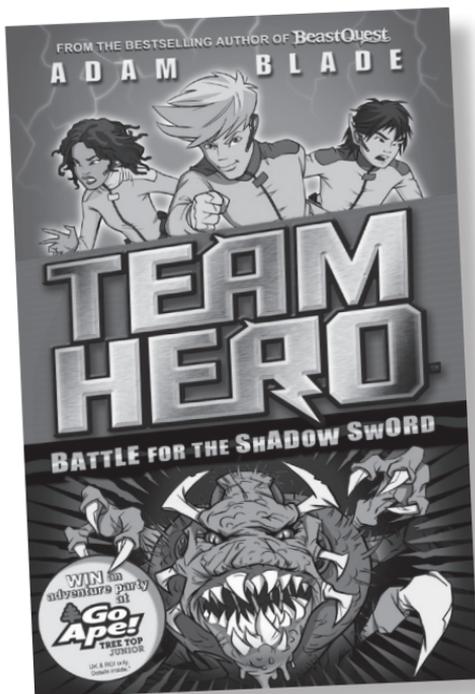
"Have you ever felt you didn't belong?" she asked now, softly. "Like you were different?" She stared right into Jack's eyes and he swallowed.

"Always," he mumbled.

"Well, I'm going to take you

somewhere you'll fit right in," said Ms Steel. "Have you heard of Hero Academy?"

*THE STORY
CONTINUES IN*



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