



CHAPTER 1

BAD NEWS

Matthew and Gemma stared at the class of sulky eleven-year-olds. Matt and Gem weren't teachers. They were battle-hardened Shadow Rangers, but they were only a few years older than the kids they faced. They glanced at each other. They were both thinking the same thing.

"I'd rather be in a firefight with a swarm of mutant Insectoids than here," Matt muttered.

"Me too," whispered Gemma. "But orders are orders."

The kids' teacher cleared her throat. "Now class," she said. "We have two Shadow Rangers

with us today.” She smiled at Matt and Gemma. The class didn’t. “They’re going to explain to you why studying hard in school is the best way you can help Rangers like them win the war against the Insectoids.”

The class did not look impressed.

Matt stepped forward and opened his mouth to speak, but the class had other ideas.

“Why do we have to learn boring stuff in school?” demanded a boy with a freckled face and spiky hair. “You’re Shadow Rangers. You should be teaching us how to fight the bugs!”

Before Matt or Gemma could reply, a girl at the back of the class shouted, “Yeah, ’cos what are we going to do when the Insectoids attack... read them a story?”

Matt held up his hand for silence. The class glared at him. “Look, you’ll get your chance to fight the bugs when you’re older... and we’ll train

you up to do just that when the time comes, OK? But that's not what today is all about."

The class still glared at him. "So what is today all about then?" said the girl at the back.

"It's about teaching you guys how to use your brains," said Gemma. "The Insectoids aren't mindless bugs... they're clever. So we don't need cannon fodder if we're going to beat them... we need bright people who can outsmart them."

"Gemma's right, guys. So listen up, and you may just learn something that'll save your life when the time comes."

Before any of the children could reply, the door opened and a tall, tough-looking man strode in. Matt and Gemma snapped to attention and saluted. It was General Carter, the Shadow Rangers' Commander. He had a grim expression on his face. "Class dismissed," he said. The children grabbed their books and hurried out with their teacher.

When they'd gone, General Carter turned to Matt. "I've bad news, Ranger. Your parents and sister have been captured in a raid by an Insectoid snatch squad."

"What!" Matt was stunned.

"The Insectoids killed everyone else but made off with your family. It seems that they were the target. We have no idea why."

Gemma shook her head. "Who can second-guess bugs?"

"It doesn't matter why they've taken my family," snarled Matt. "All that matters is rescuing them. So I'm out of here. I can follow the Insectoids' trail into the badlands and hunt them down."

General Carter shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't allow you to do that."

Matt did a double-take. "You're kidding me, right?"