

## **Chapter 1**

The Redleaf Swamp was always particularly gloomy at sunset. Even the ill-tempered Shinsang snakes crawled lazily along the slimy mud, too depressed to snap at the glowflies swarming around them.

One small snake flicked its iridescent tongue half-heartedly out of its sharp-fanged mouth and slithered on its hard belly over the roots of the squat Redleaf trees and into a cool, shallow pool between the reeds. The cool waters soothed its parched skin after the scorching heat of the day and it glided out of the pool again, refreshed and ready for the night's hunt.

It wriggled up a nearby tree just for the fun of it and then curled down again, dropping the last few feet onto a strange, warm object. The snake crawled along this new object a bit. It was soft, but somehow firm and definitely very new. The snake was intrigued. It opened its needle-lined jaws for an experimental bite and suddenly felt a hard and horrifying jerk on its tail.

A fraction of a second later, the small reptile found itself unexpectedly hurtling through the swamp. Dark leaves, scratching twigs, and hordes of tiny summer flies passed by in a blur as the little snake twisted in vain, struggling to somehow gain purchase with its scales in the insubstantial air rushing past. With a shock, it splashed right back into the cold little pool it had left only a few moments earlier, plunging deep beneath the surface with the force of the impact. For a few moments the little snake was beside itself with rage and could only writhe madly to and fro, snapping aimlessly at the ripples with its sharp teeth. Then it remembered itself, and gathering its lashing coils together, proceeded to vent its wrath on a long-finned fish which had the ill-luck to be passing by with all the righteous indignation a little snake could muster.

Taz leaned back against the Redleaf tree again. The little snake had been slow and lazy and the glowflies shared in the listlessness, drifting on currents of hot air, alighting on her face and arms and stumbling along her skin, too weary to bite. She considered flicking them away, but decided against it. After all, they would just come back, as predictable as every other aspect of life.

The sun was setting over the swamp and the broad, flat tree leaves already appeared black instead of red. For as far as Taz could see, there was nothing but an ocean of treetops stretching all the way to the huge, searing white sun. She re-arranged herself against the trunk of her tree and continued her troubled meditations.

Taz did not know her way out of the swamp.

She wished she did, but she did not. She did, however, know how to recognize a pattern, and that was what she was trying to do. She had been sitting against the tree all day. She had, in especial, not gone to work like she was supposed to, though no one had bothered her about it. They were trying to humour her, because she had seen to it that they were very worried about her lately. Taz had very few jokers in her pack, but she knew how to use the ones she had.

She had, this day, in particular been studying the vast bleached sky above the swamp and had come to the conclusion that there was a decided lack of air travel on Sinuine, but that was only to be expected. Sinuine was not famous for being a planet of movers and shakers. It was famous for being an insect-ridden pit, inhabited only by two feuding clans of undereducated moor dwellers and an elite colony of oil drillers. Taz had read quite a lot about Sinuine, but she had never seen it, despite having lived on it for the last 17 years.

And this was because she was seemingly inextricably connected to the one other thing Sinuine was famous for. The thing that seemed to surround her and loom over her, even in the illusory wilderness of the stifling swamp.

The sprawling complex of buildings that made up the Institute was hidden by the foliage of the low-growing trees from here, but only just. And also only just hidden in the other direction was the clear-cut line through the swamp that nothing living could pass. The invisible line that went all the way around the Institute. The line that kept people out and the line that kept her in.

As the sky darkened, Taz scrutinized the horizon for the glow of city lights. There were none. Taz was, again, not surprised. The chance that there was a city on the edge of the swamp was 1: 14 235. The chances that the edge of the swamp was close enough to see were 1: 242.

That was okay, Taz told herself stoically, on with Plan B. Plan B was actually a better plan, anyway. Plan B's *were* almost always better. They gave you a chance to correct all the Plan A mistakes. Taz was very meticulous about correcting mistakes. She had what could be termed a mind for detail, and she had set it to this task with all its force.

She stared at the opposite Redleaf without perceiving its gently rustling leaves or the two small dark bats flapping near it.

There were no other options. She had satisfied herself of that now.

The path to be taken – the one she had conceived of in her mind weeks ago – lay crystal-clear before her, a chain of events waiting only for her to tip the first domino and send it all cascading into motion.

But once started it must be seen through. *There'll be no going back*, she told herself severely, though it was hardly necessary. The whole point was not to go back, and as far as risks went – she was used to risks. They were a matter of statistics and therefore easily dealt with.

No, she was not afraid of losing her nerve. For Taz it was not a question of nerve. She was only concerned that she would be gripped again by the strange lethargy that had brushed her of late, coupled with the ever stronger compulsion to end her own existence, a compulsion that only released her when her thoughts turned to escape. Of course, it was only logical that one confined to such intellectual monotony as she was would develop such compulsions. When one was exposed to a trappedness so complete any way out naturally seemed a pleasant release from constriction and onerous duty.

*Ergo*, the only logical step was to escape the monotony and the compulsions would cease. Her mind required stimulation to function properly again. It was no more than she deserved.

She tilted up her face to see if there were any stars out yet, but there were none. The air was cooling slightly with the convenient disappearance of the sun, and she shivered as the sweat dried on her skin.

Slowly, she unfolded her long body as gracefully as one of the Shinsang snakes and walked purposefully back to the Institute.