

## Chapter 1

*At the start, Urtha made the kreechers, people an plants, an they lived along with each other, the same. (from the First Tell)*

My thinks are all tangled. I stare up at the dark grey sky into the fallin wet, my eyes an nose fillin up with water.

I try to turn my head away. It dunt move, not even a smidge. I struggle to shift my arms an legs. Nuthun budes.

My blood starts pumpin the fear. I'm stuck to the urth an I ent no idea why.

The wet falls faster, like bone needles. I open my mouth to breathe, an water washes in. I'm forced to gulp down mouthful after chokin mouthful.

Urtha help me, if I can't move soon, I'll drown.

Panickin, I try again. Strainin my neck, I inch my head, painful slow, to one side. I blink the water from my eyeballs, an at last I can see sumthun.

Mud.

I'm stuck in it. No wonder I can't hear nuthun, my ears are filled with it. I see some darker patches of stones an a few big boulders, but mostly juss gloopen, grey mud.

In all this wet, it'll soon be gettin more slop an I might get sucked under. Thinkin bout suffocatin in slime has me jerkin like a wriggler on a fishhook to get free.

I was right. The ground's gettin softer an I can move a bit more. With a squelchin, suckin SPLOP, I prise a leg out, an kick til I'm twisted on my side. My gob fills with stinkin, foul tastin mud, an I push myself up quick to spit it out. Every bone in my body aches.

I sit fer a while, rubbin my arms an legs to try an get the blood flowin, an pickin grit out my ears so I can hear sumthun. But when I'm done, all I can hear is fallin wet.

I turn roun to look behind me. The steep slope stretches up ferever. I'm in a giant crater, so big, it'd take a couple of dayspans to cross.

I look down. Longway below, I see water. No gettin out that way. The only way out must be upwards. Wet drips off the end of my nose as I try to work my thinker. My gutfeel is I have to get back somewhere, but right now, I int sure where.

A sudden movement catches my eye. Sumthun's stirrin in the mud right next to me. Looks like wrigglers. My innards start gurglin, tellin me I got starve. When did I last eat? Longtime. So long, I can't backthink. Maybe I can eat them?

I lean closer fer a sniff, but can't smell nuthun but mud. I reach out, slow an careful to grab one. The minute I touch it, a claw-like hand splurps out the slime, the fingers latchin tight aroun my wrist. Screechin in fright, I sink my teeth into the hand as hard as I can. It dunt let go. I scramble to my feet, shakin my arm, frantic to get the disgustin thing off me.

All I get by strugglin is to drag the whole scraggin kreecher out the mud. The air fills with its stink an I moan in horror. It looks bigger than me, an it's ugly, all matted hair an slimy skin. Worse, its hand is still clingin to my wrist.

In all the scuffle, the mud under my feet starts shiftin an slidin, an I jump back quick to stop myself gettin caught in an urthslip.

The kreecher int so lucky. It loses its grip on my wrist as it's swept down the slope in a tide of urth. Skitterins shower down after it an I raise my arms up over my head an shut my eyes tight, tryin to protect myself.

When everythin stops shiftin, I open my eyes an look. The kreecher's sprawled out on a ledge several strides below me, an it dunt seem to be movin. Maybe it's dead? I watch fer a while to make sure.

When I think it's safe, I pick my way down, cautious, to get a closer look. I want to figger what it is. Juss as I get within reach, the kreecher opens a blood-shot eye an I catch a glimpse of blue as it stares straight at me. It musta heard me comin. A horrible dry raspin sound comes from its mouth.

'Skaarra!'

I scrabble backwards, but the urth starts slidin again, an I skid down right next to the mud kreecher, unable to stop. From the corner of my eye I see it reach out to try an grab me, but I'm slidin past too fast fer it.

Next eyeblink, the ground goes from under my feet an I plummet straight down, squealin like a waterpig, til I hit the muddy water far below with such a wallop, all the wind is knocked out of my breather. Gaspin desperate, I suck in mouthfuls of wet by mistake.

My head feels like it's goin to splode.

I struggle to my feet in the shallow water, splutterin an retchin. As soon as I can breathe again, I look up to see where I am. Big wet stretches out in every direction. My thinks find the word fer this. *Lake*.

My toes squidge in the sludge at the bottom, an I remember sumthun bout lakes. Scaly kreechers with long snouts an sharp teeth live in the water. They pull you under to drown you, then gulp you down whole.

I spin roun, tryin to find land again. I need to get out, *fast*. The wet tips down even sharper. I flail through the lake quick as I can, tryin not to splash too loud, scannin the surface aroun me every blink fer any sign of movement.

The water here is chest deep an I hope I dint splosh out to the middle by mistake. Pantin fer breath, I lift my feet from the silt an float fer a while. It was stupid of me to panic like that when mostlike there's nuthun here.

When my heart stops beatin so loud, I listen out fer other sounds. I hear the wet ploppin onto the water all aroun me - but drummin like it does on land, some way on the left. I turn to look. I can juss make out the straightup wall of the mud bank again. I'm so relieved, tears sting my eyes.

Suddenly I hear the croakin sound, very faint above the noisy backdrop of fallin wet.

'Skara! Skaaarra!'

My thinks kick in at last. What's *wrong* with me? I splash my way back through the muddy water as fast as I can, an start climbin back up the crater wall.

The kreecher up on the slope is callin me.

Skara is my name.