

THE TALE OF ERSKINE FAERN

A street in the Town of Terreh Thomas Faern is 14

The Faerns's cart, stacked tall with barrels of pine syrup, was drawn by a pair of mules. Thomas's Ma and Da rode on the seat at the front of the cart. Thomas walked alongside. They had come from their farm at the break of dawn that day. As they neared Terreh's riverport, it was getting into the evening. A woman in white robes with black holy symbols slowly moved from one side of the street to the other, lighting the streetlamps with a candle balanced atop a tall wooden rod. Thomas had a keen eye for the symbols. On the left shoulder of the robe was an intricate outline of a human heart, with a thick line stitched across it. On the right shoulder was the outline of a human brain, and a line stitched through it vertically. On the sleeves were stitched the corresponding arm bones that would be below them. On the body were stitched dozens of faces with the eyes made to look sewn shut. This light-bearer was an acolyte of the temple of the death queen.

Thomas realized that he had stopped walking to stare. He jogged to catch up with the wagon, coming up with an excuse along the way—he would say that he'd thought he'd seen something fall off the cart and was trying to retrieve it, but he must have been mistaken. When he caught up, it was of no matter. His parents had not realized he had gone. Thomas was the youngest of four, though for quite some time, he was more

or less an only child. His older siblings had each disappeared on trips to Terreh in years past, while Thomas had stayed at home. Jack had died in an inn collapse. Moira had run off into the woods and was never found. Danielle had fallen in love and run off with a strange man. Thomas had his doubts about all of these tales.

At the port, Thomas stood beside Ma while Da had a long conversation with a ferryman. After some time—many eons, by Thomas’s estimation—the ferryman counted out a sum of silver coins into a sack and handed it to Da. Thomas and Da got to work unloading the barrels onto the ferryman’s boat. When the work was finished, Da handed Thomas a silver coin. “Get your Ma and you a meal,” he instructed. “Bring me back the change.”

Thomas nodded, took the coin, and he and his Ma walked off.

After a short while, raindrops began to sprinkle. Thomas and Ma looked up at the dark night sky.

“I’ll get the umbrella,” Thomas offered, and jogged back to the cart.

There at the cart, Thomas grabbed the umbrella, but he also happened to overhear Da and the ferryman in conversation.

“The boy’s worth double that,” Da said.

“He ain’t,” said the ferryman, who had lit a cigar and held it in his mouth as he talked. “Scrawny. You did near all the work yourself with the barrels. Thirty silver.”

Da gave a contemplative groan, mulling the offer over.

All at once, the rain grew from sprinkles to downpour. Thomas opened the umbrella and walked away from Da, away from Ma, into parts unknown of Terreh. He wondered whether he was following in the footsteps of any of his older siblings, or if they had all been whisked away by the ferryman unawares. Thomas stomped through the forming puddles. Eventually he found an alley to sit in and cry in relative private, aside from a few others who had taken shelter in the alley to escape the rain.

One of the others, seemingly an older man though it was hard to tell in the dark, was drinking from a bottle and grumbling to himself. Thomas sat with his head down, ignoring him.

The grumbling grew louder, until eventually Thomas heard distinctly that the man was calling out, “Oi! Kid!”

Thomas pretended he couldn’t hear.

The man started insulting Thomas, calling him a bum, a starving no good no work orphan, a brat, a spoiled brat, anything to raise Thomas's ire.

From behind him, reverberating through the wall, Thomas could hear the rising of a steady clap, and then a hearty chorus of voices singing. Thomas got up. The man got up too. Thomas ran out of the alley, brushing past the others, and darted into the common room of the inn.

Just inside the door a meaty hand caught Thomas's chest, knocking the wind out of him.

"All booked up tonight," said a thickset man, seeming bored. He looked down at Thomas, and seemed to realize he might have been mistaken. "Are you that fishmonger's lad?"

Thomas nodded.

"Apologies, sir," the man said, still seeming bored, but he stepped aside.

Thomas walked briskly into the inn and disappeared among the dense crowd. He snickered as behind him, he heard the drunk man calling after him but being stopped at the door.

Standing on a table at the center of the room, there was a man dressed from head to toe in ribbons of red, green, and yellow. Strapped to his side was a drum, which he struck slowly in time to lead the beat of the clapping patrons. He was in the midst of leading them in a song, singing a line which the crowd then shouted atonally back. Feeling sufficiently anonymous in the crowd, Thomas joined in on the fun.

"Yoho diddle doe diddle dum diddle deer!"
YOHO diddle DOE diddle DUM diddle DEER!

"Our man Johnny bought the dancer two pints of beer!"
Our MAN Johnny BOUGHT the dancer TWO pints of BEER!

"Spilled half of each as he was ogling her rear!"
SPILED half of EACH as he was OGLING her REAR!

"Spilled the rest on her bosom and his heart filled with fear!"
Spilled the REST on her BOSOM and his HEART filled with FEAR!

“Yoho diddle doe diddle dum diddle daughter!”
YOHO diddle DOE diddle DUM diddle DAUGHTER!

“Just then down the stairs came the dancing girl’s father!”
*Just THEN down the STAIRS came the DANCING girl’s
FATHER!*

The song continued on a long time. Eventually the man in the ribbons stopped beating on the drum, but kept the crowd clapping in time by clapping his own hands high above his head for a few beats. As the crowd went on, the man unstrapped the drum, and then seemingly from nowhere, produced a slew of colorful balls which he began juggling. Members of the crowd whistled while others continued to clap, and Thomas just stared in awe, unable to even count the number of balls the man kept up. With his foot, the man began stomping in double time, and the crowd followed suit, doubling the pace of their clap. The man stopped juggling the balls in one big arc and instead juggled in two separate little circles, one with each hand. The crowd whistled as he crouched down low to the table, the backs of his hands nearly touching the surface, and then rose up and up to his tippy toes, the balls nearly hitting the ceiling. Coming back to center, the man juggled in a way that Thomas could not make heads or tails of: the balls danced in a variety of arcs from hand to hand, but always there came one to rest centered at the man’s chest, seeming to pause there impossibly for multiple seconds before resuming its arc and being replaced by a new ball of a different color. Thomas noticed as the man quickly crouched between tosses to grab something off of the table. Whatever it was, the man was now lighting the balls on fire one by one until they all were ablaze. The crowd cheered and cheered, although those nearest the man backed off a good distance, and many began eyeballing the exit. Thomas stepped forward to take the place of those who had left the front row.

Still juggling the flaming balls, the man in the ribbons looked down at Thomas, sweating and wearing a wide smile. “I like your bravery, son,” the man said, speaking over the crowd just loud enough for Thomas to hear. “Catch!”

From the whirling arcs, one lone flaming ball left the pattern in an easy lob towards Thomas. On reflex Thomas caught the ball, which went out in his hands.

The crowd roared for Thomas. Thomas, beaming, turned to them, holding the ball in a hand high above his head. Then remembering that he wished to remain relatively unnoticed in this place where he actually was not supposed to be, he dashed back into the crowd. Someone in the crowd handed him a pint. He had never drank before, but he was his own man now, so who could tell him no. He drank some and suppressed the urge to gag as he swallowed it down.

Later on that night, after the show had finished, Thomas still had well over half of the same pint left as he sat by himself at a booth in the corner of the common room.

Suddenly sitting beside him, there was the man in ribbons, though he had now changed into a drab shirt and trousers. Thomas had learned in the show that the man's name was David. "Havin a good night, are we?"

"Not..." Thomas considered, and then decided not to bother the performer with his troubles. He shrugged. "The show was amazin. I wish I could juggle like that."

"Ye wanna be a jester, eh?"

"Oh, I suppose." Thomas tried to take a bigger drink from his pint, regretted it, and put the immense glass back down after letting most of the mouthful fall back into the drink.

"I could show ye to juggle."

Thomas felt his eyes widen.

"Still have my ball?"

Thomas set the red ball on the table. It was not a light object, as he'd expected when he'd seen them in the air. In fact it was heavy as a stone, larger than Thomas's fist, perhaps about the same size as David's.

David picked the ball up, stood, and encouraged Thomas to stand up out of the booth too. There in the corner of the inn, David tossed the ball in an arc from one hand to the other.

"Easy as that," he said, and handed Thomas the ball.

Thomas tried, and threw the ball back onto the seat in the booth. He tried a second time, and it landed on the floor with a loud bang that drew the eyes of many who were still lingering

around the common room that night. Thomas cringed at the attention, and crouched to find where the ball had rolled to.

David knelt and picked it up for himself. Thomas hadn't even blinked and the ball disappeared from David's hands.

"Maybe we can give it another go in the morning. Outside on some grass, eh? I give lessons you know."

"Oh?"

"Five silver for a session."

Thomas deflated.

"Too steep? I'm often told I should charge more."

"I have a silver to me name," Thomas admitted.

David glanced around, determined that nobody was in earshot, and knelt slightly to speak into Thomas's ear. "One silver now, and I'll meet you in the morning for breakfast and a lesson."

Thomas reached into his pocket and pulled out his silver coin. He paused only to ask, "Meet me outside the front of this inn at daybreak?"

David nodded.

Thomas gave David the silver.

The jester pocketed the coin and then yawned. "I think that's it for me tonight, kid. I'm beat. See ye in the morning."

Thomas looked around. He saw the thickset guard at the door of the inn, standing and staring at him. He considered trying to retire up to one of the rooms, but recalled that there was no vacancy, and so it was unlikely he could find any place to hide away for the night unnoticed. Ashamed, he left past the guard, who tutted as he passed.

Thomas made his way to the river, and spent the night hidden away under a dock. He slept very little, his stomach growling in hunger.

Before sunrise, Thomas rose and returned to the inn. He sat outside of it, eagerly awaiting the jester. For breakfast, firstly, and because maybe this was the start of his new life.

The sun rose, and Thomas sat alone. Noon came, and Thomas had relocated to a nearby alleyway entrance, as it had started to dribble rain. He still watched the inn, but he knew that he'd been had. The jester was not coming out.

In the evening, Thomas saw the thickset guard come out of the inn to replace the thinner one who had stood there the day so far. Thomas walked through the rain to him.

The guard raised his hand to block Thomas, but Thomas was making no attempt to get in.

“Is David in?”

“The jester?”

“Yes.”

The guard furrowed his brow. “Don’t believe so. Wait ere a minute.” The guard turned and walked into the inn. Thomas watched him walk through the door into the kitchen, and then shortly thereafter, walk back. “He left this morning. Packed up his belongings onto his horse in the stable in the back and rode out. Didn’t seem to Hamish as though nothing was amiss.”

Thomas sniffled.

“What, are you *his* lad?”

Thomas shook his head. “I gave him me only silver. He was going to give me lessons this morning.”

The guard chuckled. “Gave ye a lesson alright.”

Thomas lost it and stomped away.

By the time he had gotten over his tears and gotten back to the hunger in his stomach, it was dark. The rain continued to fall at a dribble. Thomas stood around a darkened corner of a dockyard, staring at a riverside restaurant where patrons ate by decorative lanternlight beneath umbrellas. He watched, and watched, and when one of the couples left with a good amount of food left untouched on their plates, Thomas sprinted up, hopped the rope fence, grabbed the sandwich from one plate and threw it onto the other with the half eaten meat pie, and ran off with the pieced together meal. Nearby patrons had gasped and shouted at him, and he heard a great many more shouts behind him as he ran off down a dark street, but by the time he had gone a block it was clear that nobody was giving chase. He walked past a couple of alleys that were occupied before finding an especially narrow one that was clear: one of the buildings leaned as it went upwards, making the alley ideal for a kid such as him, and unideal for anyone taller.

Thomas shuffled deep into the alley and sat down.

Just as he was bringing the sandwich to his mouth, he froze at the sound of something else in the alley. Fear rippled down him. Quite nearby, there was a rapid sniffing. Thomas tensed, ready to lash out if something attacked him.

The creature in the alley with Thomas whined.

“Are you a dog, you are?”

Thomas heard another whine in response, and the dragging of the creature shuffling closer over the dirt ground.

Cautiously, Thomas reached out a hand.

The dog growled.

Thomas quickly pulled the hand back. “Well you mind yourself and I’ll mind myself, then.”

Thomas bit into his sandwich. He had been shaking with hunger, and immediately, he felt energy returning to himself. Not to mention that the food was delicious. Spiced meats he’d only had once before in his life, on another trip to Terreh with his sister Danielle. Thin cuts of vegetables and a good helping of condiments, on toasted bread. He tore through two more bites, and then paused to finish chewing so he could tear through some more.

The dog whined again.

Thomas sighed through his nose, his mouth being still overfull. He took the time to chew, and swallow.

The dog whined once more.

Thomas held his plate tight. “What, you here to rip me off too?”

The dog whined sadder.

Thomas gripped his sandwich for one more moment of defiant resilience, and then sighed, put the sandwich on the plate with the meat pie, and pushed the whole collection over to the dog.

The dog hopped up and began devouring the food as fast as it would fit into its mouth. When it was finished it spent a long time licking the plate, and then a while after licking its lips.

Upriver from the Town of Terreh

Thomas Faern is 14

Erskine Faern might be 1

In all, Thomas had ended up stealing very little from Terreh. He had found great big tangles of fishing line and lures by wading through the river banks. The knife blade—or sword end, or some such—he had found jutting out of a fence post, and had not waited around to see if anyone was coming back for it. The flint and steel, he had nabbed off the side of a traveler's backpack, and had been caught and walloped for it before Erskine had come barking and snarling to liberate the boy.

Thomas and Erskine sat now at a campfire beside the river, Thomas cooking the three fish he'd caught, Erskine supervising. It was noon and only partially overcast. Erskine, though still clearly quite young, was already just as large as Thomas. He was a great big mutt with long shaggy hair that was tangled and littered with odd bits of trash he'd picked up in gods-knew-how-long of going ungroomed. Though only on his own for a matter of days, Thomas was beginning to look quite the same.

When the fish were cooked, Thomas divided the bounty evenly for himself and Erskine. Both of them ate like animals and afterwards licked the flat rocks their meals had been served on.

Thomas went and rinsed off his hands and face in the river. As he did, a river stone caught his eye. It was more or less round as a ball, and a bit larger than his fist. He picked it up, bounced it up in the air a couple of times in his hand. It had a nice weight to it. He waded upriver until he had found three such stones in all, and then returned to the campfire, where Erskine had been standing, watching him.

Standing near the fire, Thomas tossed the ball from one hand to the other. He missed it completely, and the rock thumped to the ground. Erskine bolted towards it and tried to grab it in his mouth. Thomas laughed as the dog wagged and fussed with the stone.

"Go find me a stick and we'll play."

Erskine looked up at Thomas and barked. Whether or not the mutt was being playful or mean, the volume of the bark stung Thomas's ears, and he flinched.

Thomas left the stones on the ground near the campfire for the moment, and went to go find Erskine a stick.

As the day went on, Thomas threw the stick for Erskine, threw the stones to himself, and in the evening he set a lure in the water to get dinner started for the both of them.

A street in the Town of Merrom

Thomas Faern might be 15

Erskine Faern might be 2

Thomas stood on a street corner, juggling his river stones that he had gotten painted red, orange, and blue. They were not evenly weighted, but they were what he'd learned everything he knew on. On the one occasion he'd had to use evenly weighted stones, he was completely thrown by them.

A fair few people stopped to watch him juggle throughout the busiest market hours of the day, and most who stopped were kind enough to toss a few coins of change to the boy's straw basket—woven himself, which would likely be of little surprise to anyone.

When the day's performance was over, Thomas bowed, stowed the stones in the basket, wiped the sweat from his brow, and sat for a while on the market corner, petting the shaggy brown dog that had laid at his side throughout the show. Later on in the day, he bought a sandwich for himself and a meat pie for Erskine, the cost of both easily covered by a portion of the day's earnings.

A crowded beer hall in the City of Tinst

Thomas Faern might be 17

Erskine Faern might be 4

Thomas sat at a secluded table, idly running a hand over the well-groomed Erskine who sat close at his side. It was a cool night, the air smoky with the cookfires of nearby restaurants. Thomas stared daggers at a jester in ribbons of red, green, and yellow. It was David, unmistakably. Earlier he had done the same song from all those years ago, and a juggling routine with flaming balls. Thomas was a much more skilled juggler now than he was before. David's routine was certainly still

impressive, though Thomas could now put a name to all of the tricks.

At present, David had produced a lute—none of his trademark sleight of hand on drawing out that one, which Thomas did consider fair enough, given the instrument's size. As he strummed, he told a classical tale of Leigus and Tinira.

The widowed Leigus waded through the shallow waters of the land of death for fifty days and nights, the days waning duller and the nights waning greyer, until the two were a single thing, as fogged as the air and the water. Leigus's handsome complexion was wracked with mourning the fifty days and nights of his walk. At the end of his journey, in a mist of grey nothing, Leigus stood face to face with a figure whose white and black robes contained naught but whitened, faded, and now grey bones. "What will you trade?" the skeleton hissed. Leigus produced Tinira's garden sheers, and with them, cut off his nose. His fetching looks were nothing to a world without his beloved. His nose fell to the ground, and there it grew larger and larger, forming into a torso, arms, legs, a head, a face—Tinira. The new body gasped at life anew as Tinira's soul entered it.

David's rendition of the tale continued. Thomas waited patiently for the jester's show to end.

When the jester took his final bow and descended from the table, Thomas melded into the lingering crowd and followed the jester out of the beer hall and into the common room of a nearby inn. These days he looked respectable enough to usually get into such places uninterrogated. Near the common room's hearth, Thomas stopped to kneel face to face with Erskine.

"Wait for me here, if you would."

Erskine sat.

Thomas stood and followed David up the stairs, spied which room the jester went into, and then hid himself away around a corner until hearing the door open and close again a while later, followed by the opening and closing of the door to the bathing room. Thomas skulked down the hall, eased his way into the

jester's room, and took quick stock of the jester's equipment, which had been strewn on the floor near the foot of the bed.

There were the balls, though Thomas cared little. In addition to his favored river stones, Thomas had procured through legitimate means a set of twenty colorful weighted balls. There was the lute, and although he was tempted to steal it and learn to play, it was not what he had come for: he could get a lute in any city, if he saved his coins. What he had come for was the pair of devices that the jester had not tossed onto the floor, but had placed carefully on the room's little desk. Thomas hadn't seen them during the show all those years ago, but he had been watching keenly this time. In each of David's sleeves had been some type of apparatus that lit the balls on fire, only for a second as they left David's hand, and going out in time to be caught again safely.

Thomas nabbed the devices, fled the room, darted down the stairs, and walked briskly out of the inn, giving a *c'mere* wave to Erskine, who wagged, stood, shook as though flinging water from himself, and followed out at Thomas's side.

Early the next morning, Thomas awakened at his and Erskine's latest riverside camp. They'd found a secluded spot east out of Tinst, in a dried up divot of dirt where the river used to flow, but didn't anymore, finding an easier route just nearby. They hadn't need of a fire for that night. Thomas had spread out a blanket and laid on his back and Erskine had burrowed up against his side, and the two had slept warm enough.

First thing that day, Thomas beheld the new gadgets he'd stolen. He sat in the divot of dirt looking the things over. Each one had a cuff to hold the device to the wrist. Besides that, there were also a few little tubes connecting a few little opaque tanks. Thomas held the device up to his left ear, and shook it to hear if the tanks were filled with anything. As he shook it, his hand slipped on the device, pushed a toggle, and snapped one of the tubes—the next thing Thomas knew, the entire left side of his face was on fire, sizzling and smoking. Screaming, Thomas dashed to the river and leapt in.

Afterwards he laid on his back on the riverbank for a time, trying to take deep steady breaths, trying to push down the pain.

Erskine tried to lick him. He held the dog at bay, but thanked him all the same, and stroked him comfortingly.

When the burned Thomas felt ready enough to travel, he went and packed up the meager camp, kicked dirt over the pair of cuffs, and made the hike back towards Tinst. In the suburbs thereabout, he found an apothecary and purchased salves suitable for his burns. "A lesson indeed," the boy muttered as he counted out sixty silver and change for the witch.

Though not eager to stay in the city proper, where his thievery might quite well be deduced, Thomas decided to spend the time it took to heal camped near enough to the city, in case anything about his condition did take a turn. Thomas rented an inn room in the suburb of Wrelt. He and Erskine shared a bed and three square meals a day. They went on walks and played fetch in the field behind the inn. Each night by the hearth, Thomas picked the brambles out of Erskine's coat and brushed the good boy, while Erskine rested his chin on Thomas's knee, or in the crook of the young man's elbow.

A booked performance hall in the Capital City of Verruskt

Thomas Faern might be 25

Erskine Faern might be 12

Though far from the only act of the show that night, Thomas was more than eager to rise to the occasion of being chosen as the closer. He still enjoyed juggling the river stones in his idle time, but he had graduated from that in his public performances. Torches, axes, hammers, and swords were in his repertoire, to name a few. In among all of these, Thomas also juggled seven shoes that had been volunteered from seven members of the audience, and a hairpiece more-or-less volunteered that he had taped around one of the hammers to give it the needed weight to throw in the enormous arcs of this final routine. In closing as all of the items fell back to Thomas for one final time, the juggler threw each shoe back to its owner, threw each sword at a target behind himself, let each torch go and ignite a fuel-soaked pyre, let each axe fall and chop a log of wood, and let each hammer crash up through a colorful pane of

sugarglass suspended at the ceiling, making the glittering pieces come raining down over the stage. The audience erupted as the glass dust came down, and showed no signs of quieting as it settled. Thomas stood looking out at them, beaming, catching his breath. He beckoned the owner of the hairpiece to come on stage and collect it. The owner came up. Thomas guided him to face the audience, and together, the two of them bowed.

Thomas felt transcendent as he left the stage. And although coming down from the most exceptional performance of his life thus far, he felt a deeper happiness swelling in him as he neared his dressing room.

Pulling aside the curtain, he smiled down at Erskine, who was resting on a pile of folded blankets, wagging up at his friend. Thomas came and sat there on the floor with Erskine, back against the dressing room wall, staring blankly at the ceiling as he pet the old dog.

Eventually, Thomas's gaze lowered down to the full-body mirror that was across the dressing room. He looked at himself. His upper body was very muscular. Half of his face was disfigured and immobile from burn scars. The other half of his face, he had decorated in tattoos: a little star below the eye, the name *FAERN* spelled out in an arc above the eye but under the eyebrow, three imperfect circles in a triangle on the cheekbone, and a canine noseprint on the cheek proper.

Thomas lowered his head down to Erskine. Erskine licked the human's forehead with care. Thomas stroked the dog's scruff likewise.

A road north of the Capital City of Verruskt
Thomas Faern might be 25
Erskine Faern might be 12

Thomas and Erskine slept soundly, cuddled up in their little tent, which they had pitched to the side of the trade road.

Thomas awoke with a start when Erskine let out a loud bark.

Bleary-eyed, Thomas rested a hand on Erskine's back. "What do you hear out there?"

The hair on Erskine's back was raised. He released a string of barks, body tense, facing the tent door. At a pause in the barks, Thomas strained his ears, but could hear nothing outside.

Clearing the sleep out of his eyes, Thomas got to his knees at the tent door and began unfastening the little knots that held it shut. After pulling the last string free, Thomas moved the tent door aside, and found that his face was an inch away from a bear's face. The bear fully eclipsed the view of the world outside the tent, and was raising a paw to strike.

Erskine bolted past Thomas and latched onto the bear. Thomas gave a wordless, mourning shout. The bear roared and spun around away from the tent, swiping at the dog that was attacking it. Erskine yelped but did not stop. The bear and the dog's struggle brought them onto the road, well lit by the full moon on that clear night. Thomas ran to his pack that sat against a nearby tree, and retrieved an arsenal of swords. He hurled them one after the other, and then the axes, and then the hammers, until the bear was motionless. But the damage had been done. Thomas held his friend's lifeless body and wept.

The shallow waters of the land of death

Thomas Faern might be 30

Walking through the shallow waters for fifty days and nights was a balm, not a burden. For Leigus seeking Tinira, perhaps this had been the difficult part. They had lived quite near the land of death to begin with. Thomas had crossed an ocean and three continents. But it was worth it. He had arrived.

On the close of the fiftieth night, Thomas came face to face with a figure in the grey whose white robes were decorated with the black symbols of the death queen, whose face was a skull, whose hands were bones.

An ancient wind blew from behind the skeleton, passed through their bones, and brought their message hissing faintly to Thomas's ears: *"A life for a life. What will you sacrifice?"*

Thomas gave a sendoff to his life as a juggler with a final trick. He drew an axe from his belt. With his right hand he tossed the axe in the air, where it spun once as it rose, once again as it fell, and then chopped off the selfsame hand which

had thrown it. Then he drew a second axe, and in the same fashion, cut off his left hand as well.

The wounds on his forearms seared shut. In the shallow waters, his hands floated to one another, and formed together. They grew, and took the shape of a barrel of a canine chest. Four legs. A head. A tail. Long brown fur.

The servant of the death queen turned and floated away on the shallow waters, into the grey fog.

Erskine, anew with youth, barked playfully at Thomas, head down, haunches still in the air, tail wagging. In tears, Thomas dropped to his knees before Erskine in the waters, and rubbed the dog's coat up and down as the dog licked the scarred man's face. "I missed you, friend," Thomas said, and repeated it again and again as he and Erskine were reunited. "I missed you, friend."