

2017 AFSA Art Merit Award \$2,500 Winner - Grace Thompson

Author's Note: *Fallen Blood* is a book exploring my personal interpretation of the Robin Hood legend. Chapter 11 takes place after Robin, known as Nil, has been gravely wounded in a battle (stabbed in the ribs). In his dreams, Nil must find a will himself to wake up so he can recover from his wounds.

Fallen Blood excerpt - Chapter 11

Nil could not feel anything except the fire eating away at his ribcage. Wild cinders, flaring and pulsing. Embers crawling through his side, consuming him in raw heat.

Sometimes he managed to track down the elusive idea of clarity. Sometimes he could hear their voices: Arthur and Will.

"His fevers so high ... he's dying."

"He won't die."

"I can't feel his pulse."

"Beat it back into him!"

"We can't keep him going like this. If he's going to live he needs to wake up ... Did you hear me?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"He will wake up."

But the worst part of it was that Nil couldn't make himself wake up. He wanted to, and he knew he had to, but he couldn't force his limbs to move or his throat to flex. He knew he had to open up his eyes but they were crusted shut, and every part of himself felt so heavy he could not imagine moving again. Waking, sitting up, faraway dreams. Standing, walking, **running**, fighting ... those were impossibilities, ideas of an active imagination.

Unable to twitch in the pain of wake he let himself fly in the solace of sleep. He let his feathers ruffle against the clouds and his wings wipe through the stars. He touched the moon and it came away in tiny particles in his hand and then disintegrated below him. He swam in the trees and ran in the waves. Flowers grew as great as forests and mountains shriveled to the size of pennies.

He landed in a grove of ash trees and spun until they became willows and swallowed him in ivy, trailing up his spine and carving their thorns to set fire to his ribcage. Then the ivy

dropped rose petals which sunk into the ground like acorns and the sun shattered the skyline as it collided with the moon.

And pale light, gold and silver, would meet and dance across the horizon as they courted. Slivers, dashing, painting the black sky in the colors of royalty, splashing the world into eerie bright light. Thin beams of light struck out, cutting the snares from his limbs and freeing Nil from the ivy, destroying his wings.

He could not fly and he collapsed and sunk into the Earth and watched the sun and the moon war before him. That is where Arthur walked to meet him, and sat down beside him and asked.

"Which of them are you named for?"

Arthur cast his hand outward, as if to throw a die, and the gold and silver lights flashed to illuminate the forest of trees. All the trees of the world, even those Nil could not name. Strange, contorted shapes and colors he did not know--blossoms in soft pinks and crippled black branches of blight. Nil stood up slowly and spun, around and around, floating, flying, soaring without his wings.

He landed hard. Fingers splayed out across the dappled white wood of the mountain ash. His wrists climbed upward, until they plucked at the bright red of the berries and spun through the silken strands of green leaves. A vivid red leaf came away in his fingers and fluttered, disintegrating and dashing away. He opened his mouth, but it wasn't his voice that spoke it was a woman. A woman patient, kind, and courageous, a woman of unfathomable love like the love of any mother.

"Aspen."

"They call me Nil."

"I'll call you Robin."

"Aspen."

He spoke this time with the woman, with his mother, letting his voice lap into hers and drink her sweet tones.

"Aspen."

The bark fluttered and rippled and the seasons dashed through the tree. Wrinkled flowers and spiny fruit and gold leaves and branches of ice. And then when the years passed the bark by the tree sunk and flew into ash, spinning around and around him until the embers landed upon his skin again. And they flickered and started to bum, sliding up his skin and across his limbs and cavorting into his side to scream with delight.

The forest fell, consumed in fire. Sense returned to Nil. His eyes could squeeze and his fingers could flex, and his heart beat a firm pulse.

Then he was gone again, swirling, soaring, flying, and gnawing to climb back to the surface. Spitting and clawing to find his way again. He fell, whirling down a straight chute, fingers clawing at the sheer cliff for a hold, trapping him as he sunk further and further away.

His hands shot forward and scraped along the rock until they bled and he hung useless above empty air, looking back to the top of the mountain. He climbed, bit by bit, aims tugging upward, upward, ever upward.

A face careened into his view, making Nil let go and fall, losing his progress. Scraping against the rock to regain himself, blood welled across his skin. He looked up at the man who faced him and had no name for him. Blond hair, a beard, patched armor. He was no one, until an axe morphed into his grip and an arrow spurted in his throat. Nil ' s eyes grew wide and fear laced itself into his muscles, this was the man he had killed. A man whose blood spilled from his mouth as he spat, his armor stained red.

Nil watched the grotesque display until the bloody mercenary raised his axe and hacked at Nil's hands until blood flooded both their bodies. Nil raised his arm and grabbed at the axe, letting it rip into his hand, carving a bloody swath across his palm, he used it to pull himself up and struck the mercenary, so they both stumbled and fell again, down the cliff, off into nothing.

Sinking into emptiness.

Nil found his fingers tom against the rock, pulling himself up the rock face again, inch by inch, lungs bursting for breath, and arms aching for respite. He found the top and clambered to safe ground and stayed there, too exhausted even to look at the view he had conquered. Knowing it would only be the broken, bloodied body of the mercenary with an arrow in his throat. That it would consume his vision, his history, his horizon, his prize. That the life he took would be the only accolade for his victory.

Nil waited at the top and tried to find his way back through the murky fog toward the fire. He had found that the fire was where he could be awake, and where he could fight to open his eyes. And no matter how the fire burned and ate at him he had to find it so he could live.

He was pacing through the fog, ignoring the blood and the gore and the rearing flames until he found the center of it all. The white blaze, the conflagration howling of reality. Nil took a deep breath, and saw the charred aspen tree decrepit and dying in the center. The fog swirled around him, threatening to pull him away, to throw him from the cliff if he dawdled too long. Back toward the revenge of the mercenary and the emptiness of sleep. Nil reached out and grasped at the disintegrating branches of the tree, and pulled himself forward, stepping into the fire.

The world snapped, breathed, spun, shot, blasted, whirled, and erupted. He could feel them pushing out of his back, his wings. Returning to him as they furled outward, bright and strong, white matching the fire which did not eat at them but instead made them shine. They glowed and trembled and then shot him upward, toward the light and into the excruciating agony of reality.

And he woke up.