

Angel of Mercy

©2007 Jean Johnson

It was a cold winter night when Minya woke abruptly. The unsettled lowing of cattle in the barn woke the young widow from uncomfortable dreams—disturbing ones, in which her late husband had not died from falling and hitting his head on the fire irons at the village tavern after getting involved in a drunken brawl. Shivering at the ill omen, she listened to the restless dairy herd for a few moments, then slid out of the covers. She did so with a mixture of reluctance at the chill in the room, and dread at the possibility of wolves. Or worse, bandits. Hungry wolves would only attack her to defend themselves, after all.

Pulling on layers of wool, she reflected yet again that it just wasn't easy, managing a herd of ten milch-cows on her own. Well, eight; Glossy was gravid with a calf waiting to drop in the spring, and Spots had dried up just this last month, and would be in need of studding at about the same time. The cattle were still lowing out there, though they'd settled down a little by the time she wrapped a shawl over her nightcap, settled the knife that was always placed on the table by her bed into her belt for comfort, and moved out of her little bedroom into the main room of the cottage.

There were two bedrooms, a bathing room—with a pump that piped water from the well—a kitchen, and the parlour. The two bedrooms shared a chimney, each with a small fireplace; the bathing room had an equally small boiler hearth, and the kitchen had a large hearth and a baking oven, back-to-back with the smaller parlour hearth. But since she was the only person here, only the fireplaces in the kitchen and bedroom were used frequently, and at that, they had been banked for the night, leaving the cottage cold enough that her breath visibly puffed.

Not that she could actually see it, at the moment; there wasn't much light that seeped in past the shutters and the double layer of oiled parchment nailed over the windows, one layer on the outside and one on the inside of the walls.

They were going to have glass windows someday, Tanden had often boasted. Real glass, just like a fancy home. And they might have been able to afford it, for the pale, blue-tinged cheeses of Bluebrick Dairy were famous for their sharp, tangy, savory flavor. But no matter how much he boasted, their profits had been poured down his throat whenever he'd gone to the tavern.

She had been dazzled by his handsome face and fancy home. Most farming families in this region slept in the same room on one half of their cottage, and the kitchen was the same as the parlour in the other half, while *they* would have separate rooms for their children, and rooms for sitting, bathing and cooking! But, dazzled as she was, Minya hadn't realized what he was doing with their profits. She hadn't been nearly as wise in

the early days of their marriage about managing money as she was now, nor as careful back then.

Money that was bound up in the cattle in her barn. Without milch-cows, there was no milk. Without milk, there was no cheese. Without cheese, there was no money. Without money...well, she was only interested in selling cheese; she refused to be reduced like so many other poverty-stricken widows to the point of selling herself to keep herself fed.

It was a simple progression of logic: milch-cows gave milk, which she turned into cheese, and sold for money. All she had to do was keep the cows safe and happy, well-fed, and dropping calves every year or two. Whatever the hardship or danger.

Stopping by the little door that let out into the lean-to that was the wood-shed, she hefted the splitting axe from its place next to the door. Settling the makeshift weapon over her shoulder, Minya cautiously unbolted and unlatched the door. Pulling it slightly open, she peered outside, looking for any sign of danger. Moonlight poured, blue and silvery, over the snow drifts blanketing the yard. It had still been falling when she'd finished milking the last of the cattle, softening the ruts caused by her trudging back and forth from cottage to cattle barn, to hay barn and back, but had stopped at some point while she slept.

Money had vanished into the latter structure, in the hiring of enough hands to scythe enough hay for her four-legged girls to eat through the winter. More money would be needed come the spring to freshen Spots with a good bull, and maybe Birdie, too—so-named for the vaguely bird-shaped white spot on her right flank—since that cow was showing signs of drying up soon. But she had a lot of cheese set aside in the cool depths of the well-house, hardening and aging to perfection. Wheels that represented the coins that would *not* be turned into drinks that would be poured down the throat of her late husband.

There were tracks to the cheese-house, though not nearly as many as to beast and fodder; she 'made cheese' once a week or so, when she'd gathered, settled, and curdled enough milk to make it worthwhile, but mostly, she used the tunnel between the root-cellar under the cottage and the cheese-cellar under the well-house. It was the most comfortable place to be, whether in the cold depths of winter or the broiling heights of summer. She only went there from up above when she wanted to take a pail of milk straight from the dairy barn, without first skimming the cream for butter, her secondary source of income, or when the weather was mild enough to risk opening the door, since too much cold or heat could spoil the processing.

But it wasn't the snow-shrouded signs of her own tracks she sought in the dark of the night, tonight; no, she wanted to know if there were fresher, four-footed tracks, or ones from the more dangerous sort of beast that ran on two legs. The moonlight poured down on the mostly quiet scene, throwing everything into blue-tinged, half-shadowed array, weakly shadowed with the snow casting back its own reflected glow. Despite its aid, Minya couldn't see any actual tracks.

If anything were prowling around the barn, upsetting her milch-cows, it was doing so on the far side of the barn, on the pasture side. She shut the door on the cold night air for a moment, fetching the lantern she used for her chores, and painstakingly lit it at the kitchen fire. Not that she'd need it outside, but she might need it if she had to go into the dark depths of the barn. Easing the door open once again, axe still carefully balanced on her shoulder, she shut the heavy panel behind her, making sure the latch-string was on the outside so she could get back into the house again.

Now her breath steamed visibly in front of her face, forming a silver mist as her boots creaked softly through the snow. It didn't block her vision, though; she could see no new tracks on this side of the barn, and the lowing had finally stopped. For a moment, Minya hesitated. Her bed was still warm, and would be warm for a few minutes more.

The girls aren't making a fuss anymore; maybe whatever it was is gone now. Maybe I should just go back to bed...

No. She'd never get to sleep, not with the guilt of *what ifs* running through her head. Her luck had turned around slowly since her husband's death, but now was not the time to be cavalier about her future. She had to make sure they were still alright.

So, cautiously, she continued across the yard to the edge of the cattle barn, and peered around the corner. No tracks were visible. Minya crossed to the other corner, and peered around that end. Still no tracks. Tightening her grip on the axe, she returned to the middle of the wall, and tugged on the latch-string, lifting the metal bar inside the barn.

Easing the door open, she peered into the dark interior. The herd rustled and shifted, lifting their heads to catch her scent. A couple of them bawled and lowed uneasily, though not quite as loudly as before. Something *had* unsettled them, though not to the point of an actual fright.

Stepping inside, Minya lifted the lantern with her left hand, axe still gripped by her right. There were more than ten stalls; before Tanden had drunk away most of their profits, then killed himself like the fool he was, they'd run a large herd of thirty. Now, most of the stalls were empty, their former occupants long since gone; they'd been sold to other dairy farms when Minya had realized she couldn't milk all thirty cows on her own. Not and still run the rest of her household, even reduced to just herself as it was.

Once upon a time, they'd had two hired hands, a brother and sister team, to help them with the milking. But dairy-hands had to be paid, and she hadn't been able to afford that in the hard months following Tanden's death, when the tavern-keeper had demanded payment for all of his drinking. Now...well, the remaining cows had gotten used to being milked relatively slowly, one after the other, instead of four at a time. So long as she did the milking in the correct order, they didn't fuss anymore about how long it took her to get to each spotted lady.

Since the barn was so large, with two-thirds of it standing empty, she'd hung curtains fashioned from old scraps of sacking, rough-stitched together to block off the unused stalls. It made the barn marginally warmer; the thick hay strewn on the floor of the remaining, occupied stalls made it that much more so. For the ease of chores, she'd coaxed her four-legged girls into taking stalls at the near end of the barn, though it had been a trick to teach them to come to the new stalls instead of visiting the old ones as had once been their habit.

Easing the door shut to preserve the warmth generated by the milch-cows' bodies, she scanned the stalls and their brown-and-white spotted inhabitants. Spots was chewing her cud, while Choosy was still lowing softly, anxiously. Bluebright flicked her ears in greeting, Grotto, Umber, and Poppy flicked their ears in greeting, and Riverfoot ignored her. Then again, the spotted milch-chow usually drowsed with her muzzle almost buried in her manger, oblivious to the world around her—not eating, just dreaming.

Mostly, it was Glossy, Grouse, and Birdie who were the most upset; they were at the far end of the double row of stalls. Glossy and Grouse were on the left, Birdie on the right...and one of the curtains for the empty stalls on the left side of the aisle was slightly askew.

Something was in here.

Heart in her throat, Minya crept over the soft hay she'd pitched down and spread out across the central aisle earlier that evening, lantern clutched in one hand and axe in the other. She approached that awkwardly draped scrap of canvas...and heard a faint rustling, as if something were trying to retreat from the soft glow of her light. Her axe-hand threatened to sweat despite the chill stiffening her muscular, milking-callused fingers around the wooden hilt. Uneasy, she firmed her courage, thought of her cattle, their milk, the cheese, and the money she would get from selling it, and eased the curtain back with her lamp-hand.

A dark bundle crouched awkwardly on the covering of old straw she'd cast down back around mid-autumn, to insulate the cold paving stones underfoot so they wouldn't leech too much of the cattle barn's warmth out of the air. It almost looked like a man wearing a massive, black-feathered cloak...but no one wore cloaks made out of pure-black feathers. Nor did black-feathered cloaks bleed, the crimson liquid appearing as a glistening dark stain as broad as her palm and nearly as long as her whole arm. Minya stared at the apparition, dumbfounded.

She had a fallen angel in her barn.

Even as that thought occurred, she blinked it off with a frown. She wasn't some ignorant peasant, to be lured into a belief in angels. Such creatures were supposed to be superior life-forms, perfect in every way. Beings created of greater goodness, according to the legends of the distant past...

This was nothing more than a Goethe.

In specific, he was an Ana Goethe, given the blackness of his feathers and the darkness of his hair. Since even the inhabitants of her sleepy little village knew the Goethe race had been at war with themselves for more than a hundred years, Minya knew there was no such thing as an angel. Angels were supposed to be minions of the gods, and therefore above petty things such as war.

Huh. They're no better than Tanden, in their own way. He gets drunk and kills himself in a fight over no good reason...and they slaughter each other without even getting drunk, again for no good reason. Leastwise, no one's ever told me why the Visi and Ana Goethe hate each other so much. After more than a century of it, I wonder if even they remember the why and wherefore of their little war...

Though that unnamed reason occasionally made her curiosity itch, Minya was far more curious to know what this particular Night Flyer was doing here, miles from the places where they were known to fly. The other races didn't mix much with the Goethe anymore because of their civil war, and because very few could stand against them in combat. The Flyers were natural magicians, known to wield arcane powers as easily as they could speak, while the other races had to concoct potions, craft talismans, or use special herbs and chants, doing their meager best to focus their own mystical forces via laborious means.

No other race could fly without the magically expensive use of spells, either, so the Goethe were hard to reach in their place high above a battlefield, let alone attack them, save by arrows and such. That one of them had been injured by what looked like a sword-cut, or a knife blow, and had been forced to take shelter in *her* barn...

The black-winged man looked barely conscious. She could see the gleam of his eyes, slitted against the glow of her lantern. He hadn't moved much, other than to shrink back a little, halfway under the shelter of the empty manger, exposing more of his dark-hued clothes even as he tried to shelter the extent of his injuries. Since he apparently wasn't going anywhere, she took the time to study him more closely, noting his similarities.

His breathing was shallow and swift, though nearly silent, and his semi-handsome face was pale, almost colorless. She preferred a beard on anything adult and male, but other than the lack of one and the addition of wings, he could have been a Nalda. One twice as attractive as Tanden had been. Three times as handsome, if he'd been healthy, she decided. It didn't help that the Goethe's lashes were as dark as the locks straggling across his brow, emphasizing his pallor. His bottom lip looked like he was biting on it, and the general tension in his frame told her he was in serious pain.

It wasn't until Minya slid her gaze down towards his waist that she realized his wing-wound wasn't the only one; one of his arms was wrapped around his side, and his pale hand and wrist were stained with blood. She expected a metallic tang in the air from that much blood; she was farm-bred, and used to the scents of slaughtered animals, if not

necessarily wounded sentients, but what she smelled instead was something...spicy. Almost like the spice-cake that had been served at her wedding over three years ago.

They stared at each other, wingless Nalda and injured Goethe, until he finally drew in an unsteady breath and spoke, addressing her raggedly through his pain. "Either...leave me alone...or kill me quickly."

The hurt in his voice couldn't be disguised by tense muscles or a show of bravado. It wasn't just a physical pain. Somehow, Minya knew he'd lost more than just blood and the ability to fly. Almost against her will, her heart softened with compassion. *To be reduced to begging for death? And I thought I was in poor straits.*

Lowering the axe, she turned away, leaving him in the curtained-off stall. But not to leave him alone. Within moments, she was back with a wheelbarrow, the one she used to move bundles of hay and bags of grain. Rolling it into the stall, she positioned it just so, hung up the lantern for light on a peg pounded into one of the posts supporting the hayloft, and maneuvered around the bulky barrow. The Night Flyer gave her a confused, wary look, but said nothing, just continued his near-silent, shallow catches of breath. Waiting for her to kill him, or to leave him alone.

"...I'll do neither," Minya answered his question firmly, if quietly so as not to spook the herd any further. "You need your injuries tended, and I can't have the scent of your blood upsetting my good milch-cows. Since it looks like you can't walk at the moment, and I can't carry you, you'll go into the wheelbarrow. Besides, it's warmer in the house...or it will be, once I rekindle the fire."

"You're...going to...help me?"

"Of course."

He gave her a dubious look. "Why?"

"Because you're injured." And with that, she bustled around the staring, startled Goethe, urging him briefly onto his feet, then helped him to collapse into the wheelbarrow, maneuvering his wings as best they both could manage.

Even a farm-girl like Minya knew the Goethe had two forms, a winged one like an angel, and a wingless one like a Nalda, her own race. But he didn't shift forms, though it would have been far less awkward to maneuver if he had. She didn't know very much about his race, but she suspected his injuries prevented him from doing so.

It took a bit of effort to get him out of the stall without banging and scraping those wings on the gateposts, but she managed somehow. Minya let him cradle the lantern, too, as she trundled him out of the barn, pausing only long enough to stuff the long-handled axe into the back of her belt. Getting him through the relatively narrow house door was a bit more difficult, since it wasn't built with the passage of winged beings in mind.

Helping him gently fold the injured wing as tightly as he could, and helping him to extend the uninjured one straight back, past her arm and shoulder in a wall of sleek-feathered black, she trundled him into the kitchen. Leaving him in the wheelbarrow, she quickly built up a new fire over the old coals. Helping the injured Goethe onto the bench by the table next to the hearth, she handed him the bellows and left him in charge of encouraging the fire, while she returned the wheelbarrow to the barn. Once back in the other building, she tucked the barrow away and went through the cattle barn to the far side, to check on the set of doors there, where he must have entered the barn.

He'd managed to latch the barn doors, at least. But there was a splotch of blood and two black feathers in the trampled snow, just beyond the doors. Grabbing a shovel, Minya snatched up the feathers and quickly turned over the snow, hiding the bloodstains, then tucked the two palm-length feathers into her belt. Back inside, she scooped up the bloodied hay into a bundle, tucking that into her shirt.

Once she was fairly sure there weren't any obvious traces of her visitor visible outside, she pitched down fresh straw and mixed it into the older stuff, resecured the barn, and returned to her house. The sight of the wheelbarrow's lonesome, blatant track stopped her. Hurrying back to the barn, she dragged it out again, headed over to the woodshed, loaded it up, and steered it up to the edge of the snow-dusted steps leading to her front door. *There, that will explain the barrow-tracks...*

Entering the kitchen, she found her unexpected guest barely moving, his eyes glazed and his blood still seeping through his dark blue and green clothes. Thankfully the fire had caught, and was now burning brightly. Feeding it a little more, including the bits of bloodied hay and the two feathers to burn the evidence of his arrival, she set the kettle on its hook to heat and boil, then bustled about the kitchen.

Living on a farm meant doctoring her own injuries. Minya fetched a pot of salve meant for soothing minor cuts, her sewing basket, and swaths of cheesecloth that would double as bandaging. Gingerly, she cleaned, stitched and bound his wounds, guessing that they were indeed from some sort of knife or sword by the look of the cleanly sliced edges.

Through all of her ministrations, he said not a word. Only an occasional hiss of pain would escape his lips, and now and then his bloodied hands clenched and unclenched, depending on how deeply she cleaned a wound, or how badly her needle stung his nerves as she sewed up the gash in his side. Once his wounds were cleaned, secured and bandaged, Minya turned her attention to cleaning the rest of him.

She'd had to cut off the wool tunic he wore, to tend his side; she'd done her best to cut along the seams, so that it could be restitched, later. It was a clever garment, with a hole between his shoulder-blades where the wings sprang from the thick muscles on either side of his spine. But it was torn almost horizontally along the side where he'd been wounded, damp and crusted with tacky, brown-drying blood. Bits of straw clung to the material where he'd lain in the stall, adding to the mess.

She set the tunic in the washbasin she normally reserved for her dishes, then helped him ease out of his boots, then out of the trousers that were also soaked with blood. Not, thankfully, from another wound; just from the blood that had seeped down from his side. He shivered when he was reduced to his undershorts. The Nalda debated whether or not to remove those as well, thinking he might prefer a bit of modesty, but they, too, were sticky with darkening crimson. Sighing, Minya retreated briefly to her bedchamber. Unlatching the chest she opened only when it was cold enough to require several more layers than her own clothes-chest could provide, she pulled out the woolen clothes kept in there and returned to the kitchen.

“Here,” she said to her visitor, who was gingerly trying to flex his injured, stitched and bandaged wing. “Stop fussing with that, and put these on, so you don’t catch cold. The, uh, coat can be turned around and buttoned up the back somewhat, so it doesn’t interfere with your...um... Anyway, it should keep you warm.”

He looked at the grey wool she was offering, and finally spoke again, reaching for it. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Minya replied automatically.

Then blinked, wondering abruptly what she was doing, here. *I have an Ana Goethe in my kitchen, about to wear my dead husband’s clothes. I’ve tended his wounds, and I was about to offer him something to eat and drink, too, when his whole race is nothing more than a pair of blood-thirsty war-bands...*

Gods, what am I thinking? She couldn’t ignore her own kind-hearted nature; her husband’s drinking may have reduced her to poverty, but he hadn’t broken her of the habit of hospitality. Drawing in a steady breath, Minya politely asked, “Would you like a bit of bread, with some toasted cheese? I also have some fresh milk to drink.”

“—*Milk?*” he half-asked, half-scoffed, showing the first sign of a willingness to converse.

“Well, this *is* a dairy,” Minya returned as pertly as she dared. Goethe were renowned for their magics *and* for their short tempers towards the ‘lesser’ races; at least, these days they were short-tempered. The old tales spoke of better days, though sometimes Minya wondered if those tales were nothing more than the frothy imaginings of wistful dreamers. She rather doubted it was the effects of something as tangible as nostalgia, forgetting the bad things and remembering only the good.

“...Just the cheese, please. Toasted on the bread will be fine,” he added quietly, pain still roughing the edges of his voice. Gingerly, he tested the injury, flexing his wing again. “And some meat, or an egg if you can spare it.”

“I’ve got a bit of sausage that won’t need more than a moment of cooking, and it’s good with cheese-toast,” she asserted, washing her hands and forearms at the kitchen pump, before bustling about the kitchen. She hesitated before beginning the meal, then asked. “You needn’t tell me what happened...but it would be polite, and nice, to know your name. I’m Minya. The Widow Bluebrick.”

“I’m...sorry to hear of your mate’s passing,” the dark-winged angel sitting on the bench at her table murmured, not yet giving her his name.

“I’m not. It was simply his time. More and more, as things went on,” she found herself muttering out loud, and stilled for a moment. Blushing in embarrassment, she hurried to toast the simple meal on a fork over the coals and flames.

“You have put yourself in danger, by helping me,” the still unnamed Ana murmured.

Minya shrugged. “No more so than I’d face from other things that might take the notion to sneak into my dairy barn. At least with you, my cows are safe. Unless you planned to eat them, in which case I might have to take back my offer of food.”

That made him chuckle, then cough on a stifled groan. “I meant...by the Visi who were chasing me. If they are still in pursuit, they would not take kindly to the thought of a Nalda helping me. Anything that helps a Night Flyer is considered the Enemy, to them.”

“Well, I’ve heard that you Goethe can fold up your wings somehow, and look like a Nalda. Why don’t you do that now?”

“Because it requires magic, and I’m not sure how close those Day Flyers are; they might sense the transformation. That, and my injury would still be visible on my back. Around my...my down patches,” he finished, after what she thought was an embarrassed pause. A glance showed his pale cheeks could have been just a little flushed, though the golden glow of the fire could have been as much to blame.

Returning her attention to the toasting fork, she pulled the layers of bread, cheese, sausage, cheese and bread off of it, mashed it a little more firmly together so the heated cheese would seal the layers in place, and handed it to him. “Here, eat this. I’ll get you some milk anyway; the bread’s a little dry.”

Opening the trap door in the corner, she descended into the root cellar, taking a mug and a rush-light with her, ignited at the fire, to see her way. Uncapping the lid on one of the tin buckets that had already had the cream separated for butter-churning, she dipped a couple ladlefuls into the plainly glazed mug, recapped the pail, and brought the mug back up with her. And found herself hastily backing down the steps as the Ana came down them without warning, arms clamped tight over his injured side.

“What the—?”

“They’re coming down here!”

The harsh whisper was accompanied by a wild-eyed look in those dark blue eyes. Compassion again won out over common sense, for Minya grabbed him by the nearest elbow and hustled him down the last few steps and over to the narrow door that led to the well-house cellar. “In there!”

He hissed as he worked to fold and maneuver his wings into the opening, twisting sideways so that they could fit. Shoving the rush-light at him, as well as the mug of milk to make sure he kept up his strength, she left him to shut the door and make his way through the narrow tunnel alone, while she hustled back up the stairs. She noticed the pile of bloodied cloths and bandaging supplies, and swept them into the washing-basin with his bloodied clothes, then hauled the lot of it downstairs and shoved it through the little door.

Pulling it shut, she dragged from the corner a bundle of corn-stalks that had been tied and knotted into a vague man-shape with simple but laboriously applied farmer’s magic. It was meant to protect the stores in her cellar from post-harvest decay, and could be leaned anywhere down here. Minya quickly propped the stalks up against the door, camouflaging it.

Rumor said the Goethe in her cellar passage could have simply concentrated his will to secure her cellar against spoilage, rather than labor over the stalks in the attempt to imbue some harvest-sympathetic magic into them, but she didn’t exactly entertain Goethes every day, let alone invite any over for milk and harvest-magic each autumn. ‘Never before’ would be a more accurate description of how often she was visited by his race...and now it seemed she would be visited by both sub-races.

As soon as the corn-sheaf had been settled firmly over the narrow door, breaking up its outline and hiding the latching-string, Minya hurried up the stairs, shoved the last of the bloodied hay onto the fire to burn, put another washtub in the missing one’s place in the dish washing area, and quickly scrubbed the stains of her labors from her fingers and palms.

She heard the cattle lowing nervously again a few moments later, just as she was drying her hands on a towel. Those hands shook so badly, she almost dropped the scrap of cloth before managing to toss it onto the table. Snatching up the wood axe on her way out the door, Minya lunged into the snow-filled courtyard, brandishing the weapon with still-wet hands, yelling, “—You get away from my cattle, you damned mutts!!”

And skidded to a stop, as she spotted two white-winged, white-haired Visi Goethes, caught in the act of opening her barn door. She did her best, convincing act of a startled, uncertain woman, lowering the axe slightly in the dim, white-gold glow of the magefire burning over their heads.

“What...” A moment, a blink, and she put a hard look on her features. “What are you Day Flyers doing here, disturbing my cattle? You’re going to put them off their milk, disturbing them in the middle of the night!—Were you here earlier?” she added with narrowed, suspicion-filled eyes. “This is the second time tonight something’s gone and spooked my girls!”

They looked at each other, then the shorter of the two winged males spoke. “What happened the previous time?”

“I don’t know; whatever it was, it was gone by the time I checked the barns, and I couldn’t see any tracks. But I’ll not put up with another disturbance tonight!” she asserted, hefting the axe again. She was operating on pure bravado and a tiny dash of lying, but with a hefty dose of pure honesty, too. She really *couldn’t* afford to have her cattle spooked. “Those milch-cows are all I’ve got left, and I can’t afford to have ‘em scared out of their milk, because then they’ll have to be re-studded, and I’ll lose the wages in milk and butter in the meantime while I’m waiting for ‘em to breed again! *What* are you two doing here, uninvited on my property?”

“We’re chasing an Ana fugitive. He may have hidden himself in your barn,” the other Goethe asserted, placing a hand on the door panel. “We will check—”

“—You will certainly *not!*” Minya snapped, darting forward and brandishing her axe near his taller head, forcing him to duck back from the door. “Didn’t you Flyers hear a word I said? Listen to that lowing; you’ve spooked my cattle! If you cause ‘em to lose their milk, I’ll take it out of your white-feathered hides! Besides, what makes you think that some Night Flyer came here? We don’t see Flyers of *any* color around these parts—nearest I’ve heard of any of you coming this close is a good fifty miles away! How do I know you’re not here to *steal* my cattle, huh?”

The shorter one arched a sardonic brow at the taller one. “She’s as cow-obsessed as a Mintak.”

“Yeah, well, I’m a lot smarter! You can check the hay barn, but *I’m* checking the dairy-barn. My girls won’t spook themselves milkless, if it’s just me.”

“Don’t make us laugh, Ground Walker. You can’t defend yourself agai—” the tall one started to say, and cut himself off as she swung the axe at him, stopping it with muscle-wrenched force just short of biting the blade into his neck. If he tried to pry it out of her hands...well, she’d been milking for three years, now, and he’d probably end up lifting her bodily off the ground before her callused, muscular hands would let go of the handle. Not to mention she’d chopped a lot of her wood herself since her husband died. That had built up a lot of muscles in her arms and shoulders, and a lot of confidence in how well she could wield an axe.

“...These are *my* cows, and *my* barns, and *my* lands. What I say, goes!” the widow asserted, pulling back and waving her weapon for emphasis. “And *I* say I don’t want *any*

of you Flying Freaks on my property!—And before you try laughing in my face with your feather-be-damned magics, I'm the Widow Bluebrick, and I make the best damned cheese for near two hundred miles around! That means there's a *lot* of my fellow Naldas who'd be upset with you, if you tried to harm me.

“Now, ‘cause I *don't* want any of you Flying Freaks on my land,” Minya continued briskly, hiding her nerves by firming both her voice and her grip on her only weapon, “*you* can check out the hay barn over there, while I check out the dairy-barn. The well-house is locked up tight, ‘cause that's where I age my cheeses, and I've been in the house all night long, so your Dark Freak isn't in there, so he's either in here or the hay barn. *If* he or she's here. But you *aren't* going to ruin my livelihood—*got that?*” Minya snarled at both of them. She swept the wood axe in a semi-wild arc towards the hay barn. “Get over there an' check it out! *I'll* check out this one.”

And with that, she hauled open the door and slipped inside, crooning to her girls. She spent a few moments soothing each one, then checked through the curtained spaces, then went up into the hayloft to check up there, too, just so she could be honest in saying there was no Night Flyer in her cow barn. When she came back down, the shorter Visi had crept inside and was eyeing her cattle, who were lowing and shuffling nervously once again.

“*Hey,*” she growled softly, hurrying down the ladder, hefting her axe as soon as she reached the bottom. “I *told* you not to spook my cattle. Get out of here!”

He started to frown at her, but she advanced on him, axe hefted in a clearly ready-to-swing grip, and he backed warily out the door. Whatever their determination to catch the Night Flyer in her cellar, they weren't prepared yet to use their magics against her. *For which, I thank all the gods that were ever invented,* she thought fervently, following him outside. Farm-magic was the only kind she could manage, never mind any battle-magic.

“He's not in the hay-barn,” the other Visi Goethe asserted, as Minya stepped out into the moonlight, hauling the door shut with her free hand. “Was he in the...?”

He trailed off, seeing the mean scowl on her face. Minya asserted herself before he could question her “I *told* you to not enter that barn and scare my cattle! You damned near sent ‘em into a bawling stampede from your foreign scent! You Feathered Freaks owe me eight guilders, one for each milch-cow I have in production!”

“*What?*” the Goethe asked, startled by the demand. “What do you mean, we owe you money?”

“I said, you owe me eight guilders, for spooking my milch-cows, you Day Freak!” Minya asserted, her volume rising now that she wasn't right next to her dairy cattle. “And you're *going* pay, or you're going to have to see if you can get the hell off my property before I hack off your gods-be-damned wings!”

“She’s insane!” the shorter Goethe asserted, glanced at his companion. “Are all Nalda like this?”

“Are all *Goethe* like this?” Minya mocked, “Rude bastards!” she shot back. “There was a day we used to *worship* you, ‘cause you were all good-hearted, kind, and *polite* folk. But now look how low you’ve come! Scaring *milch-cows*, and harassing poor widows! Get off my land!—No,” she corrected herself sharply, brandishing the axe. “Pay me my harassment fee, *then* get off my land!”

“You *are* insane!” the taller Day Flyer observed, eyeing her as he would’ve eyed a dog that was foaming at the mouth and staggering down the lane.

“You bet I am!” Minya snapped back, still riding a tide of bravado, fear and honest determination to protect her livelihood. “Those cattle are all that stand between me and starvation, and you *bet* I’m going to fight for ‘em! Now, give me those gilders, and get off my property—and make damned sure you *don’t* come back. This is Nalda land, not Goethe. Stick to your *own* territory, or I’ll call out the duke and his archers. *He* likes my cheeses, and orders two score of them every year, so don’t think he won’t come out here to help me!”

“—Oh, just give her the gold!” the smaller one snapped, losing his patience. “Our quarry’s clearly not here. Not unless *she’s* chopped him into little pieces with that damnedable axe!”

Minya tightened her grip on the weapon in question, but the other one just grimaced and opened one of the small pouches at his waist. He fished out a handful of coins, roughly counted them in a single, dismissive glance, and tossed them in the trampled snow at his feet. “Take it, Nalda, and keep the extra, though I doubt one as mad as you deserves such good fortune. But know that if you *ever* harbor a Night Freak, we’ll be back, and we’ll do *more* than scare your cattle dry!

“Come on, let’s leave this filthy patch of ground...”

The two Visi Goethe launched themselves with great, wind-blowing, wing-pumping leaps, rising in opposite directions to give their vast wingspans enough room to stroke against the night air. Squinting against the harsh, icy breeze that swirled down around her, Minya kept her axe at the ready, glaring at the rapidly retreating figures in suspicion until they were barely visible against the moonlit sky. Only then did she lower the axe and crouch, digging the coins out of the icy pits they had made from being cast into the snow. It was too dark despite the moonlight to see where all of them had fallen, though. Glancing warily at the sky, Minya went back into the cottage and fetched her lantern, shivering in the chilly night air.

She knew she could not afford the luxury of ignoring even the smallest denomination, no matter how much their contempt might have stung her pride. Nor could she wait for the next thaw, since by then the ground would be muddy, and the coins might be lost in the

muck. As distasteful as it was to take the money from such arrogant, feathered dastards, she needed every bit of it.

By the time she had gone through every inch of the now thoroughly dirty snow in the area where the coins had been tossed, she had almost eleven gilders' worth in gold, silver, and copper coins. Considering it would take less than half a gilder to stud just one of her cows to the best dairy bull in the region, it was a small fortune, one that would see her through the next couple of years without having to dip into her own profits to keep the dairy functioning.

She'd pulled a very desperate bluff, threatening those Flyers with just a wood-axe, and making such outrageous demands for recompense...but she'd pulled it off.

Gods and Feathered Fools, I could even hire a milch-maid, to help me with the milking and the separating, the cheesing and the churning... I could afford to keep the calves that would be born from the studdings, and slowly restore the herd to what it had once been!

Assuming, of course, that those Day Bullies never found out she'd actually harbored a Night Flyer, *and* gotten away with it right under their own noses. But the risk was one she was willing to take, staring at the money in her hands.

Wrapping the coins up in her kerchief with cold-numbed fingers, she checked around the yard to make sure the dairy and hay barns were firmly latched again, then carried her loot into the kitchen. Looking outside one last time, she shut the door and resolved to check the ground again once the snow in that area melted, however dirty and time-consuming the task, just in case she had missed a coin or two. Re-stoking the fire, she thawed her fingers above the glowing coals and dancing flames, waiting not only for her fingers to stop tingling and aching, but for her knees to stop shaking in the aftermath of so much unsettling excitement.

Only when her nerves had settled did she use a dollop of the hot water from the kettle with some cooler water from the sink pump, and washed the coins off in the warm liquid, re-counting her treasure to be sure she hadn't imagined her bounty. Patting them dry, she carried them into the bedroom and tucked them into the lockbox stored under her bed. Then she peered out the door again for any sign of Flyers, Day or Night, before shutting it and pulling the latch-string for the night. Exactly as she would do if she were completely alone.

Only then, when she was as sure she could be that her unwelcome, white-winged intruders were long gone, did Minya descend into the basement, shift the corn-sheaf back to its original corner, open the door, and move the washtub out of her way. By the light of the lantern, she made her way down the narrow, earthen corridor to the well-house cellar.

It was quite large for a structure where no one actually lived, but then it was meant for the milk, cheese and butter produced from a dairy herd of thirty milch-cows. The upper level was reserved for the mouth of the well, filled around the edges with butter-churners, curding tubs, whey-presses, beeswax ingots, salt barrels, bolts of cheesecloth and so forth. The lower level, where she emerged through another narrow door, was lined with shelves that formed a sort of square maze around the cold stones of the well shaft, shelves filled with crocks of butter and wheels of cheese, some with salt-cured rinds, others with waxed rinds. In the farthest corner, completely shadowed and warmed against the chilly air under a cloak made of his own wings, sat the still nameless Ana Goethe.

“I think they’re gone, for now,” Minya told the lump of large feathers, and flashed a grin as the lump stirred. Now that she wasn’t having to put on a brave face, she could see the humor in how she had behaved, and how they had taken her bravado for Nalda insanity. “I even made ‘em pay for distressing my milch-cows!”

“They haven’t gone far,” he warned her, lowering one wing just enough so that she could see his pale face. “I can still sense them at the edge of my range. So long as I don’t use my magics, they won’t be able to locate me, but they’re still within ten miles of this place. They have to use their magic to see their way through the dark...and right now, that’s the only advantage I have. I don’t need to do that.”

Minya chewed on her lower lip, frowning at the revelation. “So they’re waiting for you to use yor magic, is that it?”

He caught her concern, and shook his head. “They’re Day Flyers; they’ve probably found a more hospitable place to catch some rest, now that they’ve lost my trail. If...if it isn’t too much trouble, Widow Bluebrick, if I stay here for another two days, maybe three at the most... I’m sure they’ll give up and leave in a day or two. If you don’t mind my staying, that is. I, ah, heard all the shouting that you did,” he added, clearing his throat carefully. “We Sons of the Night have very good hearing, as well as very good night-vision.”

The risk of the Visis returning and catching this Ana in her basement was still high enough to be a worry for Minya. As bright as her future now looked, it could be wiped out by an outraged Day Flyer in an instant. On the other hand...if he hadn’t dropped into her life, she wouldn’t have gained the money that would save her from constantly balancing on the edge of financial ruin. Clearly she owed her good fortune to the cause of tonight’s worries. It would be a poor way to repay the change of fortune those coins represented, to cast him out into the snow.

Minya nodded, half to herself, half to him. “You can stay. Mind you, I’ll put you to good use, churning butter and the like, but you can stay for a few more days. On one condition.”

He arched one black brow warily. “...What condition?”

She smiled at him. “You tell me your name, first.”

Her ‘condition’ made him smile, transforming his face from pinched with pain and tense with worry to something almost beatific with relief and relaxation. “I can live with that. Halzan. Halzan of Clan Fallowhill.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Halzan of Clan Fallowhill. I’m Minya Bluebrick. Come, I’ll put you in the spare bedroom for the night. There’s no need for you to freeze down here with the butter and the cheese.” She turned to lead the way back underground to the house.

“About that...your cheese is really good. Not to strain your safety any further, but...do you think you’d be willing to trade with my Clan? And some of your butter, too?” Halzan asked as he rose from the stone floor to follow her. “We really don’t get much in the way of dairy goods these days. We can do the trading through an intermediary, to reduce any risk to yourself—some of the traveling merchants have found it quite profitable, despite the risks...”

Enough money to stud my cows, to expand my herd and hire an extra hand or two...and now a new market for the Bluebrick cheese I’ll be making? Risky or not, that’s too much good fortune landed in my lap not to return the favor! Minya grinned. Who would’ve thought her fortunes could’ve turned so good so quickly, and all in the course of one cold winter night? *They do say that good fortune comes to those who help others to turn their own ill-luck around...*

“If you can keep those feathers of yours discreet whenever you visit, Halzan...why not? *You*, at least, are a heck of a lot more polite than those Day Bullies were, and I’d be delighted to do business with you and your kind, if you’re a fair representative of ‘em.”

“I’ll deal with you myself, whenever I can spare the time; I’ll hand-pick the intermediary when I cannot come by, otherwise.” He paused, then gave her an odd, indecipherable look.

Minya raised one of her brows, staring back at him. “What?”

“*You*, Widow Minya,” the Ana Goethe murmured as he followed her up the stairs, his words a strange kind of irony, “are an angel of mercy, to help me so much.”

Minya smiled and blushed at the compliment. “...Just don’t spook my cows again; that’s all I ask.”

The End