

The animals were fed and watered, the cow was milked, and all were settled in for the night. Greylin's emotions had calmed and she was almost, nearly, not quite ready to form new plans. She sat down with a big bowl of stew and slice of bread. A spoonful of stew on the way to her mouth when she heard, "Sniff...huff...growl..."

She froze in puzzlement. That was not a sound she knew, and she knew all the sounds inside and outside the farmhouse. That sound didn't match any of them. Certainly not one of the dogs, all of them should be far away on the upper fells with the sheep. She held her breath and listened. *Could it be that slinkhound? Or more than one? Why is it hanging around?*

Sniff...huff...growl...

It was an animal, surely, but nothing she had ever heard before. There was a sound like the soft slide of a furry body along the outside of the wattle and daub wall of the cottage. She glanced over at the wooden shutters. She had just closed them for the night and she breathed a silent "thank you" to herself for remembering to latch them. She pictured some dark creature jumping through an open window into the house and shuddered. Then she remembered she hadn't latched the top half of the door!

Sniff...

Whatever it was, she'd have to handle it herself.

Huff...

She quashed a prickle of fear. She was trained in combat skills, she should be able to handle this.

Growl...

She jumped out of her chair and grabbed a poker by the fireplace. It would have to do—at least it was made of iron, not like the useless wooden swords they used in training. She took a step toward the door...then hesitated...should she go out to meet it? Or stay inside?

It was already too dark to see out; none of the three moons had risen yet. She stared at the door. *Could it jump over the bottom half?*

The candle on the table shed a soft circle of light on her wooden bowl and spoon. It would allow anyone or any *thing* outside to be able to see in—to see her—but she wouldn't be able to see it outside in the darkness. She didn't like that advantage.

Should I douse the flame? No, that would be worse. Let me see what's coming. There was a long, deep sniff just below the top edge of the door. The hair on the back of her neck rose. She darted at the door and closed the top half with a thud and latched it. Slinkhounds had short legs but whatever it was still might be able to jump in, short legs or not. She breathed a sigh of relief and leaned against the door.

HUFF...

She moved away and turned. A dark shadow seeped under the door. She blinked. *Was that a trick of the light?* She backed away even further and glanced at the candle to see if it was dying. It burned steady and strong, but when her gaze returned to the door, the darkness had doubled in size. She glanced to her right and noticed the ghost she had named "Rosie" wringing her hands in anxiety. *Oh, that can't be good,* Greylin thought, *even the ghost is scared!*

She began to silently mouth the litany against fear and pain: *"I stand as one with ELIEL, between the EL within and the EL without, the above and below, between the darkness and the light, nothing can hurt me. ELIEL protects me, ELIEL defends me, ELIEL preserves my spirit..."*

Before she could finish, the door burst open and a pack of slinkhounds rushed into the room. A thick dark fog rushed in with them. She swung the poker and heard it connect with a crunch followed by a sharp howl. At least she'd gotten one, though she knew there were too many. She tried to swing again before the next one got to her, but a blinding flash of light knocked her down. All was silent, dark, and still. Five bodies, including hers, lay senseless on the floor.

Find out what happens next...