

L. D. Alford
1704 N. Cypress
Wichita, Kansas 67206
(316) 636-9514
pilotlion@aol.com

101,530 words

Essie: Enchantment and the Aos Si

by

L. D. Alford

Lyonshall, Herefordshire, Great Britain

Mrs. Lyons, actually, Matilda Anne Robina Acland Hastings Lyons, who happened to once be married to Colonel Bruce Lyons, and who held onto the Mrs. and the Lyons as mementos although the man was long dead, heard a crash in her kitchen. She was a light sleeper anyway, but the crash rang loud enough to wake the dead. She reached under her pillow for the prototype Etan Arms AP-1 nine millimeter semi-automatic pistol she kept there. She examined the sleek weapon, a gift from her favorite adopted great grandchild, Leila, and returned it, with the safety still on, to its hiding spot.

She slipped out of the covers as quietly as a very old woman could and instead of her pistol, picked up the heavy cane beside her bed. She constantly carried it, not because she needed a cane, but because everyone expected her to carry one—she enjoyed the privilege and the recognition. Mrs. Lyons was very old, but not weak, demented, or non-mobile. She looked wrinkled and gray now, but didn't care a lick about appearance anymore. She still looked thin

and athletic—about as athletic as she always was, which wasn't very, but she could move as well if not better than a woman half her age. So she imagined.

Mrs. Lyons pulled her dressing gown over her nightgown and hefted her cane. She didn't turn on any lights. Her vision was still good, and her eyesight was already well adapted to the thick moonlight that shined outside her windows. She walked through her open doorway and down the hall toward the front of the house.

Her country house was small, much smaller than the places she inhabited as a child, a young woman, or a married woman. She was now a widow, and a small cottage in the country seemed to suit her. The hallway led to a classic branch. To the right, lay the foyer and front door. The foyer opened to a dining room on the left and a parlor to the right. To the left lay the servant's quarters—none in use at the moment. In front of her ran a short hall to a phone closet and a water closet—an odd combination to be sure. To the right of that short extension, lay the dining room and to the left... the kitchen.

Mrs. Lyons heard another peculiar bump and then a thump from inside her kitchen—she strained to listen closer... or perhaps the sounds came from her pantry. She held up her cane like a baseball bat and peeked around the opening into the kitchen. She squinted in the darkness, but didn't spot anything amiss.

She heard another thump. Slurping sounds and a slight growl followed it. Mrs. Lyons wondered at that. The constable had reported thefts of food and unusual break-ins across the shire, but they seemed wholly of human origin. This sounded...animal-like.

Mrs. Lyons almost continued on to the phone closet to ring the constable's post in the village, but she realized no one would be on duty at this time of night. She shrugged, and soundlessly—well, as soundlessly as she could, stepped into the kitchen.

She snuck around the cabinet side, where she knew none of the creaking boards would betray her, and almost tripped over a light metal boiler on the floor. Her visitor must have knocked that from the counter. With greater care, she slowly slipped to the pantry door. The door stood open—of course it did. She knew she had shut it tight after making her evening tea.

Mrs. Lyons brought her cane up in front of her, but with a slight cock for leverage. She craned her neck around the opening to the pantry and kept to the shadows so she wouldn't be backlit from the kitchen window. Only a thin slice of the evening's full moon shone through that window, and it lay to her side at the back of the kitchen. She noted her kitchen's outside door stood fully open and that let in more light than the lace covered window. That door was also obviously how her little kitchen thief had entered.

Mrs. Lyons hefted her cane again. She didn't intend to use it, except in defense, but she did want to catch her little kitchen thief. The sounds of eating, not pretty sounds at all, as well as growls rose out of the depths of the pantry. Mrs. Lyons smelled the baked ham she'd put up for the weekend. She spotted other odds and ends scattered on the shadowed floor of the pantry. That put her immediately into a more indignant mood. She didn't like thieves, but she liked untidy thieves even less.

Mrs. Lyons pitched her cane back a bit more for leverage and pressed her elbow against the pantry light switch. It was a new switch and not the old twist type. With a push of her wrinkled elbow, the switch moved, the light came on with a fluorescent blink, and a startled cry emerged from the pantry.

Mrs. Lyons gasped. Her gasp sounded almost as loud as the shocked yowl from inside her pantry. A naked girl or young woman sat on the center counter and shielded her eyes. She was completely starkers and trailed half of Mrs. Lyons' baked ham from her mouth.

For a long moment, Mrs. Lyons couldn't even imagine what she might say. Finally, she stuttered out, "There, you. Yes, you. Put down that ham and come out, immediately."

The girl held her hands over her light-dazzled eyes and spit out the ham. That's when everything turned ridiculous. The girl moved faster than Mrs. Lyons could see. She dropped to the floor and ran behind the center counter. Mrs. Lyons heard a hollow thump and a cry. Then a rush of naked flesh headed around the counter toward the open pantry door. The girl let out pained sounds the entire time. She ran blindly into the pantry side wall and pitched to the floor. Then blinking and shading her eyes, she shakily gathered her feet under her as if she intended to rush the doorway and Mrs. Lyons.

Mrs. Lyons stepped into the pantry doorway and lowered her cane in front of her like a cricket bowler at the pitch. She intended to block the door until she could shut it—to her mind, this had definitely become a job for the constable. As Mrs. Lyons reached for the pantry door, the girl sprang. The girl's dirty hands still covered her eyes, and she still cried out in pitiful pain-filled sounds. She probably couldn't see at all. She just wanted to flee.

Mrs. Lyons was not about to let the girl escape, not with a ruined ham and half her larder on the floor. The girl rushed forward directly toward the cane. Mrs. Lyons closed her eyes. She felt an impact, but her cane lay firmly planted at an angle against the old door stoop. The girl hit the cane with the top of her head and dropped like a stone.

Mrs. Lyons slowly opened one eye then the other. In front of her lay her pilfered pantry, and collapsed in a very awkward and embarrassing sprawl lay the young woman. Mrs. Lyons brandished her cane, "You get up. I intend to lock you up until the constable arrives..."

The girl made no sound.

Mrs. Lyons held her cane at the ready, “I say. You’ve placed yourself in a very compromising position...”

The girl said nothing.

Mrs. Lyons prodded her with the cane. She saw no movement. She knelt at the girl’s head with her cane at the ready. The girl didn’t move. Mrs. Lyons carefully put her cane to her side and touched the girl. The girl still breathed, but a small pool of blood grew under her head.

Mrs. Lyons turned the girl’s head and lifted it slightly. A gash on the girl’s forehead leaked blood down her face and dripped steadily onto the floor. Mrs. Lyons let out a low curse, “Bloody. What am I going to do with you now?”

The girl sucked in small gasps through her mouth. Mrs. Lyons breathed out a great sigh. She turned on the kitchen lights and found a couple of clean rags, “I’ll add this to your debt, girl.” With obvious skill, Mrs. Lyons folded one rag and placed it on the gash and tied the other tightly around the girl’s head. The bleeding seemed to stop.

Mrs. Lyons examined her intruder. The girl looked dirty, very dirty, and was completely unclothed. Old scars crisscrossed her back and flanks as though she had been beaten with regularity. Her face looked a bit dirtier than the rest of her. Mrs. Lyons couldn’t really tell what she looked like under all the grime. Her hair was long and back and silky. Filled with grease and bits of leaf mold and dirt, it looked as dirty as her thin body. She was small and looked malnourished. Mrs. Lyons was almost twice the girl’s size, but she was a tall woman. She could tell the girl was fully mature, that is as women went, but young, very young.

Mrs. Lyons gave another long sigh. She closed the pantry door and locked it, then went to the back hall closet where she kept most of Colonel Lyons old equipment. She retained everything as a reminder without expecting to ever use it. She returned with two sets of old

handcuffs, the rugged type used by the military and not the constabulary. She cuffed the girl's feet and then her hands. The girl still didn't move.

Mrs. Lyons felt a bit guilty. She wasn't at all sure what she would do with this strange girl, but strange girls of all types had long been a part of Mrs. Lyon's life. Best keep her for now. Mrs. Lyons didn't think again about calling the constable—not at this moment—too late in the evening anyway. She closed and bolt locked the outside kitchen door.

The next step became a bit more difficult and daring. Mrs. Lyons turned the girl over and grasped her arms. Although the girl was a deadweight, Mrs. Lyons had no difficulty dragging her through the kitchen, down the hall, and into the first guestroom across from her own.

Mrs. Lyons didn't want to subject her clean linens to this dirty girl. There was no help for it. Mrs. Lyons took a couple of washcloths and a bucket of soapy water and cleaned the girl fore and aft, front and back. The soapy water turned foul. The rinse came next—the result wasn't much better. Dry towels, then Mrs. Lyons went to an old armoire in the room and selected a nightgown. She always wanted a child, especially a girl child, but she'd not been blessed that way. Her very good friends bore daughters, and Mrs. Lyons made due as an aunt, confidant, chaperone, and friend to them all. In consequence, she kept some clothing for her friends' children, and this young woman fit nicely into one for a large girl.

The real difficulty came in dragging this unconscious young woman onto the bed, but Mrs. Lyons succeeded. When the girl lay there, still out like a light, Mrs. Lyons removed the handcuffs and attached one to the girl's left foot and the other to the end of the bed and the other to the girl's right wrist and to the head of the bed. It wouldn't be very comfortable, but Mrs. Lyons had entertained few sneak-thieves. She covered the girl and went back to bed—before she slept, she brought her cane very close and checked her pistol.

In the very early hours of the morning, Mrs. Lyons heard a thumping from her guestroom. The sun was high enough to call it daytime. She rose from her bed and drew on her dressing gown, then grasped her cane. Mrs. Lyons held her cane in front of her as she crossed the threshold of her door, the hall, and into her first guestroom.

The girl lay awake and tugged against her shackles with all her strength. Her wrist and ankle already leaked blood. When the girl spotted Mrs. Lyons, she began pulling harder at the cuffs. Mrs. Lyons tapped her cane against the wooden floor, and the girl stopped immediately—she cringed.

Mrs. Lyons glared at her, “That’s good. Stop that immediately. You will injure yourself and stain my sheets.”

The girl’s eyes rolled about in absolute fear.

Mrs. Lyons pulled a chair close to the bed and sat, “You should be afraid. I’ve thought about your case for a good portion of the night—I’ve lost a good bit of sleep because of you.”

The girl tried to put her arms in front of her face. She could only move one arm far enough to succeed.

Mrs. Lyons thumped the floor again, “Stop that right now. You listen to me...do you understand?”

The girl didn’t make a sound, but she lowered her hand and held it near her face, but not over it. The girl wouldn’t look Mrs. Lyons in the eyes, but she seemed to calm a little.

Mrs. Lyons didn’t move too close, “Good. Now listen. You are a sneak thief. You broke into my house and ransacked my pantry. Oddly, you didn’t take the time to put on any clothing. That in itself is very strange. Will you explain why you are running about the shire starkers?”

The girl stared straight ahead.

Mrs. Lyons thumped her cane again, and the girl jumped. Mrs. Lyons put on her most dangerous granny face, the one that, when necessary, terrified her visiting adopted grandchildren and great grandchildren. She produced no children of her own, but she had many “children” who looked to her as well as their children and their grandchildren. The girl stole a fear-filled glance at Mrs. Lyons. The girl’s face did seem to fill with terror. Mrs. Lyons gentled her look a bit. “I’m glad you are listening to me now. I have determined three options in dealing with you. The first is that I could set you free...”

The girl’s face turned hopeful, and she stole another quick glance.

“If I did that, you would simply continue to steal from the village and the shire. I almost brought out my pistol last night. If one of the squires around here caught you in their pantry, they might shoot first or worse. I don’t think letting you go is a good idea for your sake or theirs.”

The girl’s shoulders sagged.

“I definitely can’t let you continue to roam around starkers. That might cause you other problems...problems I don’t wish you to be a party to, and problems that as a woman, I can’t allow. I have no idea why you might choose that mode of dress for your nighttime excursions, but it must stop. Will you explain to me why you were in a total state of undress?”

The girl didn’t make a sound. She cocked her head as though she were listening, but she didn’t respond in any other way.

Mrs. Lyons sighed, “My second option is to turn you into the constable...”

The girl immediately began to struggle again.

“Stop that this instant.”

The girl stilled.

“I said that was an option. It entirely depends on you. You might be insane or a dangerous psychopath. I’m not so sure, but I’m willing to give you the benefit of the doubt for the moment. Can you tell me why I shouldn’t turn you into the constable right now, today?”

The girl turned her head to the side.

“Still not speaking? Can you speak? Why won’t you talk to me?”

The girl closed her eyes.

“The third option is to keep you here for now. I admit, that might be foolish but I’m willing to attempt your rehabilitation. I’m a canny old woman, and I’ve dealt with young woman before. It’s a hobby of mine that I haven’t been able to give up. Again, that depends entirely on you. I’ve never attempted this difficult of a case, but I’m willing. Still not speaking—are you?”

The girl squeezed her eyes more tightly shut.

Mrs. Lyons thumped her cane, and the girl’s eyes flicked open. Mrs. Lyons frowned, “I’m willing to give you a chance. But if you cause me undue problems, I’ll definitely call the constable. It goes against my grain, but I’m warning you. Do we have some type of understanding?”

The girl lay silent.

“Oh for goodness sakes say something, anything. I’d rather not turn you over to the constable. He won’t harm you, but I suspect you will go to prison...or they’ll put you away. Is that what you want?”

The girl gave a slight shake of her head.

“Ah, a response. Not much of a response, but a response. I’ll unlock your arm for the moment. Don’t you dare move a muscle.”

Mrs. Lyons pulled out her keychain and moved to the other side of the bed. She carried her cane in one hand and unlocked the cuff from the head of the bed. The girl moved like lightening. She leapt up and off the foot of the bed, but seemed to forget her leg was still attached. She launched herself with a slight cry, came up short with a croak, and fell with a heavy thump to the floor. Her leg wrenched around. She screamed, and Mrs. Lyons thought the girl's ankle might have broken. Mrs. Lyons moved around to the foot of the bed. The girl lay in a heap with her left leg hiked up to the level of the bed and the rest of her groaning on the floor. The nightgown fell well above her thighs.

Mrs. Lyons raised her cane. The girl whimpered and covered her head. Mrs. Lyons roared, "That is just the kind of action I warned you about." She prodded the girl with her cane. The girl cringed and had an accident. The room filled with the scent of urine.

Mrs. Lyons gasped, "Not on the hardwood. You foolish girl."

The girl remained in a heap with one leg sticking up in the air. It caught at a terrible angle. She panted like an animal and mewling noises rose from her face full on the floor. She had lost the rags around her head and the gash began bleeding again.

Mrs. Lyons put down her cane. She released the girl's leg and that plopped down at her side, into the mess on the floor. The girl tried to get away again, but her leg wouldn't move properly. Before she could slither any further, Mrs. Lyons grasped the end of the handcuff on the girl's wrist and pulled her up short. To allow herself more latitude to move, Mrs. Lyons grabbed the closest piece of cloth at hand, a pillowcase. She tied this to the end of the cuff on the girl's wrist to make a leash, "You won't get away that easily. I'm becoming increasingly worried about your sanity, girl."

Mrs. Lyons grabbed one of the towels she used to dry the girl the night before. She moved around to her front while still holding the impromptu leash and insisted, “You clean up that mess, immediately. You will not excrete or defecate on my floor or bedding.”

The girl looked up and began to dab at the wetness on the floor.

“Apply yourself with a little more energy. I’ll not have you ruin my floor with your mess.”

The girl pressed a little harder and sopped up the mess. Her head was still bleeding. It ran freely down the side of her face.

Mrs. Lyons closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She picked up her cane and thumped the floor again, “If you will not heed my warnings, then I insist you attend to my demands. I will not hurt you if you will simply accomplish what I ask of you.”

The girl began to scrub rigorously at the floor.

“That’s a bit better.” Mrs. Lyons tugged on her pillowcase leash, “Can you get up?”

The girl slowly began to stand. She put her free hand on the end of the bed and pulled herself up onto one leg. The other leg dangled uselessly behind her.

Mrs. Lyons shook her head. She tugged the leash and the girl followed with slow hops. The girl grimaced with each step. Mrs. Lyons put her arm around the girl. That brought out a growl.

Mrs. Lyons growled back, “I’ll help you to the loo. Don’t give me any of your lip, girl.”

The girl shuddered and became silent. They made a very slow progress to the water closet at the other side of the room. Mrs. Lyons helped her sit on the toilet, pull up her gown, and told her, “Use the stool. Sit there and do your business. You’re bleeding on my nightgown and my floor.”

Mrs. Lyons tied one end of the impromptu leash to the towel hanger above the toilet. Then she tied the rag bandages back on the girl’s head. Mrs. Lyons wet a washcloth and cleaned the

blood off the girl. The girl flinched, but didn't move otherwise. The blood wasn't about to all come off without a little elbow grease and soaking. Mrs. Lyons made up her mind—she began to run the water in the tub.

The girl sat in a morose heap on the toilet, one arm raised toward the towel hanger. She watched the operations at the tub with a little interest, but she kept her head down and her eyes to the side.

Mrs. Lyons sat up at the edge of the tub, “You stink of urine and you're still dirty...almost everywhere. First, you take a bath and clean up, then I'll provide you a fine breakfast...”

The girl showed her first real interest in anything. She looked up at Mrs. Lyons still from the sides of her eyes. Her eyes became large.

Mrs. Lyons smiled, “So that motivates you, does it? You may eat all you wish. Bathe first and breakfast is yours.”

The girl's mouth made a slight upward foray too fleeting and too little to call a smile.

Mrs. Lyons unlocked the cuff around the girl's wrist and left the leash tied to the towel bar. She pulled the gown over the girl's head, and unlocked the cuff around the girl's leg. Mrs. Lyons then helped her get into the tub. The girl acted like she hadn't been in a tub in her entire life. She turned to the front, slightly frantic and grabbed Mrs. Lyons arms. The girl couldn't stand. Her leg still wouldn't operate properly, and Mrs. Lyons stood in the way to any escape. Just to make certain, when the girl finally sat in the bottom of the tub, Mrs. Lyons shut and locked the bathroom door.

When she finally sat in the tub, the girl touched the water and tasted it. Mrs. Lyons took a washcloth and soap. She lathered the cloth up well and applied it to the girl. Body parts weren't a problem. Face and hair turned into a struggle. The girl was strong, but Mrs. Lyons was

stronger, bigger, and more determined. As Mrs. Lyons applied a final rinse to the girl's hair, she cooed, "That wasn't so bad. Your hair is beautiful."

The girl sat forlornly in the bottom of the tub with her toes touching, her lips in a pout, and her eyes tightly shut.

Mrs. Lyons glanced at the very dirty water and gave thanks for the opportunity—her linens were likely a mess. She pulled the plug and lifted the girl from one side. The girl meekly stepped out of the tub on one foot and allowed Mrs. Lyons to dry her. Mrs. Lyons sat her on the closed toilet, relocked the cuff on the girl's left wrist this time, and went for clothing.

Mrs. Lyons kept all kinds of girls' clothing left by and bought for her adopted grands and greats. She kept it just for visits and accidents. She picked something that might fit the girl and brought them back to the water closet. The girl sat where she left her. Her toes pressed together and her free hand in front of her.

Mrs. Lyons didn't try underclothing right away. She put a blouse on the girl and pulled a jumper over her head. That should be enough for breakfast. Mrs. Lyons looked her over, the girl was not entirely beautiful. Her face appeared thin and sleek. Her nose looked oddly small and her eyes large. She didn't have much chin and her cheekbones were high. Her ears had a slightly pointed look to them. The girl kept her hair well over them now, but Mrs. Lyons had noted them when she washed her hair.

Mrs. Lyons untied the impromptu leash and helped the girl to her feet. She took a good look at her ankle in the bath. Her ankle looked swollen, but didn't seem to be broken. The girl leaned into Mrs. Lyons until they stepped through the water closet door and Mrs. Lyons picked up her cane. The girl jerked immediately to the end of her short leash and cuff.

"I see. You're afraid of my cane." Mrs. Lyons remembered the marks on the girl's back.

The girl shifted her eyes away.

“If you promise to do as I ask, I’ll put away the cane for now.”

The girl’s face went down in a hard nod. Mrs. Lyons couldn’t immediately tell if that indicated a positive response, but she accepted it as that—for now.

When the cane came out of Mrs. Lyons’ hand, the girl moved close again. She could only hop without help. With the girl gripped tightly next to her, Mrs. Lyons made her way to the kitchen. They entered the kitchen door and Mrs. Lyons headed to the left. A small kitchen dining area sat on that side of the kitchen. It lay right under the back window and included a bistro table and four small chairs. Mrs. Lyons sat the girl in the sunlight and tied the short leash to a table leg. The outside kitchen door lay on the opposite side of the wall. The girl gave a couple of obvious glances at it. Mrs. Lyons warned, “Don’t think about escaping. I put away my cane for the moment, but I can use quite an array of objects to interject my will. Plus, I locked the door.”

The girl’s lips turned up for a moment’s moment. Mrs. Lyons wondered about that. She went to the pantry for tea, eggs, bread, jam, and ham. She had forgotten about the disarray of the pantry in all the excitement and gave a little gasp when she turned on the lights. The remains of the ham lay on the floor. Other items and storage were likewise littered everywhere. The tea hadn’t been touched nor the bread. Mrs. Lyons gave a sigh. This would have to wait until after breakfast. The girl could help.

Mrs. Lyons brought out the ham. It was cured so only needed dusting and a few deft cuts to bring to rights. She wasn’t sure where the girl had chomped on it, but the girl received those pieces—it couldn’t hurt her. Mrs. Lyons scrambled two eggs for each of them and toasted a couple of pieces of bread. She made tea, Earl Gray this morning. Mrs. Lyons set a fork, spoon,

and napkin before their places. When everything was ready, she brought the food to the table and placed it there. The girl reached immediately with her hands for the eggs and ham.

Mrs. Lyons tapped her spoon on the table, “One moment, young woman. First we must pray. Second, you will not use your hands at my table. I gave you a fork and a spoon. Now close our eyes.”

The girl surprisingly squeezed her eyes tightly shut. Mrs. Lyons kept one eye open and said a quick morning benediction. The moment she said amen, she expected the girl to open her eyes. Perhaps she had never heard a prayer before, “Dear, you may open your eyes. The prayer is done. You may eat.”

The girl opened her eyes and held them down. She reached for her fork and grabbed it in her fist. Mrs. Lyons put her hand against her cheek, “Oh dear.”

The girl looked up. Mrs. Lyons picked up her fork and held it delicately between her thumb and first finger. The girl couldn’t quite hold it correctly. Mrs. Lyons stood quickly and the girl cringed. Mrs. Lyons moved slowly and gently toward her, “Everything is all right. I want to help you learn to hold your dining utensils.”

The girl relaxed, and Mrs. Lyons placed the fork properly in her hand. She helped her scoop up a forkful of eggs and bring them to her mouth. Most of the eggs went inside. The girl dropped her fork and grasped those that didn’t before they could reach the floor—they disappeared with the rest into her mouth. Mrs. Lyons didn’t know to be shocked about the misuse of the fork or the girl’s quick movements. She moved faster than anyone or anything Mrs. Lyons had ever seen. Mrs. Lyons cleared her throat, best to ease into these things. She didn’t think the girl had ever used a fork before. That seemed possible though improbable. Mrs. Lyons stated gently, “Please pick up your fork and use it to eat your food—not your hands.

The girl glanced guiltily at her errant hand and licked the remains of the scrambled eggs off it.

Mrs. Lyons sighed and picked up the girl's napkin. She placed it in the girl's lap, "Use that and not your tongue. You look like a pleasant young woman, you might as well learn to act like one."

Mrs. Lyons returned to her seat while the girl fought valiantly with her eggs, ham, and fork. Mrs. Lyons had to cut the girl's ham into bite-sized pieces. Her use of the fork looked in no way elegant, but for a first try, Mrs. Lyons guessed it was a first try it would do. Mrs. Lyons decided to allow a bit of inelegance for the moment. She began to eat her breakfast. The girl did watch her and tried to mimic her actions. The girl sniffed her toast, but didn't eat any of it. She stuck her finger in the butter on it and tasted that. She seemed to like it and licked it off the toast. Mrs. Lyons sighed. The girl tasted the tea. Mrs. Lyons put milk in her tea and the girl copied her. She ended up with almost all milk and little tea. Mrs. Lyons sighed at that too.

As breakfast wound down, Mrs. Lyons leaned slightly across the table, "Now, dear. I've been calling you girl, but that won't do at all. What is your name?"

The girl glanced at Mrs. Lyons for a full moment. She quickly put her face down, then she sipped her milk with tea.

"You do have a name, don't you?"

The girl nodded.

"Then can you tell it to me?"

The girl looked down.

"Can you write it?"

The girl glanced at Mrs. Lyons as if she were a complete alien.

“It’s not surprising that you could write. Can you write?”

The girl gave a quick shake of her head.

Mrs. Lyons mumbled under her breath, “It’s is more surprising that you can’t write—in this day and age.” Louder she asked, “It is inconvenient for me to just call you girl. Tell me your name, or I’ll have to give you one.”

The girl spoke. Mrs. Lyons was so surprised she couldn’t make out a word. She rose a little in her seat, “What did you say...my old ears couldn’t make it out.” Mrs. Lyons possessed perfect hearing, but the excuse was always useful.

The girl looked to the side, and Mrs. Lyons strained to hear her say, “Must I tell you my true name?” The voice sounded very soft and melodious.

“Yes, please speak up and tell me your true name.”

“I was always punished when I used my true name.”

“I shall not punish you for that. What are you called?”

The girl still didn’t look up, “I am mostly called bitch and pussy—sometimes hellcat.”

Mrs. Lyons froze, “Those are not appropriate terms for you to ever be called. What is your true name?”

“If I tell you, you will gain power over me...”

“I already have power over you.” Mrs. Lyons opened her hand, “I will tell you my names.”

The girl stared at her for a moment, but quickly averted her eyes, “Then I would have power over you.”

Mrs. Lyons smiled, “If you wish. I am named Matilda Anne Robina Acland Hastings Lyons, but you may call me Aunt Tilly.”

The girl mumbled, “So many names...”

“It is a fault of birth and marriage. Now, what is your name?”

“S...”

“What was that? I didn’t catch it. Please speak up.”

“I said my name is Sith.”

“Sidth?”

The girl put up her hands, “You shouldn’t say it out loud. It is my true name.”

Mrs. Lyons spoke a little more sardonically than she really wanted to, “Then what may I call you out loud?”

The girl shrugged, “The other names I mentioned perhaps...”

“Never. Let me think. What about Sissy.”

The girl gave a slight shudder, “I have been called Aos Si.”

“Ess shee? That’s a bit difficult to pronounce. Perhaps Essie?”

The girl, Sith’s lips formed a tiny smile.

“Then I shall call you Essie. Will you answer to it?”

“Essie sounds pleasant to me. I can understand it.”

Mrs. Lyons grinned, “Very well, Essie. You may call me Aunt Tilly. Now, since we are on speaking terms, will you tell me where you are from?”

The girl lapsed into silence.

“That is a forbidden subject, I guess. Then will you answer this, why were you in my pantry?”

Essie shrugged, “I was hungry.”

“Then you were the one breaking into houses in the shire and village?”

Essie shrugged again.

“I need to know a little bit more, but that is neither here nor there. Why were you starkers in my pantry?”

Essie stared a moment, “What is starkers?”

“You didn’t have anything on. You were naked.”

Essie glanced at her, a little amazed at the question, “I didn’t have any clothes.”

“Yes, that is the point. Why didn’t you have any clothes on?”

Essie glanced at the clothing she now wore, “I’ve never owned any clothing.”

“Never?”

“Never.”

Mrs. Lyons pondered that a moment, then she answered, “Well from now on, you shall wear clothing. I have plenty to fit a girl your size. What else do I need to know about you?”

Essie made a face.

“With that, I suspect you mean you won’t say. That will be sufficient for now...except I’d like to know. Why didn’t you have any clothing? I can’t quite fathom that part. Every person wears clothing.”

“But I’m not a person.”