

Introduction to *Hidden in Sight*
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Another ebook – my seventh, in fact. I’m very proud to have my work featured in this format by Palm Digital Media. My thanks to all the fine folks there and at DAW Books Inc. It’s great to have a chance to talk to you before you start reading the latest installment of the Web Shifters’ series.

Whooh! Hoo! Yes, Esen’s back! Hurray! I admit it. I’ve been anticipating the return of the dear little blue blob as much as any reader. Why? Because writing about this peculiar character lets me pull in everything I find fun and amazing. And I do. Trust me -- what may seem the oddest, most alien biology in the Web Shifters’ books is usually based on what we’ve learned about life on Earth. You see, I don’t so much extrapolate as I combine real components for a particular purpose: to get Esen in trouble. Wicked, I know, but the result seems worth it.

(I’m really not wicked. I’ll even warn you now that if you haven’t read the first two Esen books, *Beholder’s Eye* and *Changing Vision*, you might want to stop reading this introduction right now. I don’t want to spoil those stories for you. In fact, you shouldn’t read this book either. It’s # 3 for good reason.)

By this point, I’m sure anyone reading my work has noticed my near-obsession with how living things interact. I can’t help myself. I’m curious about everything -- from how organisms sense and react to their environment, to how they communicate with one another. It’s no wonder, then, that I concentrate more on these aspects when introducing Esen’s latest choice of form, than on how she looks. Eyeballs out, as it were. That’s the beauty – and reason – for writing Esen in the first person. Being inside her head lets me give you a first-hand report on the sensations and experiences of being something ... else.

There are so many ways to get Esen in trouble with biology, I almost hesitate sometimes. Well, not really. She is, like each of us, utterly at the mercy of whatever flesh she wears. In her case, that flesh is subject to extraordinary modification without notice. At first glance, that ability is a powerful one. At second, third, and umpteenth glances, it’s fraught with peril – because living beings are complex, internally driven, and subject to their own very personal perceptions of the universe. Then there are the messy bits, like excretion, mucous, sex, slime ...

Such things matter, in real life and in my stories. In *Changing Vision*, what a body could physically sense from its environment was the crux of the plot. The Feneden were continuously misunderstood because no other species involved could know what it would be like to rely on polarized light. Until Esen gave it a whirl by becoming Feneden. Another reason I so enjoy writing this character. The consequences of her changes of form can be profound, as witnessed by the ending of *Beholder’s Eye*, a finale I still find very moving.

The consequences can also be silly, which is the fun part. The clichéd expression “my jaw dropped” to convey astonishment takes on a whole new meaning

when you add a jaw that can unhinged, like that of some snakes. So when Esen is a Lishcyn, her jaw literally does drop on occasion. I have no shame.

Then, there's the entire business of food. Obtaining nutrients and energy is one of the definitions of life, not to mention a fundamental preoccupation of teenagers, so of course Esen has to eat. For me as a writer, her gustatory misadventures not only provide abundant and typically messy ways to break the tension, but can even cause it. The trauma of finding your best friend appetizing? Being space sick? Being prone to violent regurgitation under stress? It's all good. Well, for me. Not necessarily for Esen. Or, for that matter, anyone nearby.

Which brings me to what I take most seriously about Esen and her biological quirks: how she communicates. When I put Esen into the form of a particular species, she is a member of that species to all extents and purposes. If they communicate by stamping their feet, so does she. If they lick informative slobber from the floor, her tongue is at the ready. This allows me to have a character uniquely adept at interspecies' communication. Naturally, this is a strength young Esen doesn't always use wisely, but it takes on tremendous significance when those around her are making critical errors in interpretation, simply because they lack the right hardware to understand one another.

On the other hand, the dear little blob does tend to pick up inappropriate habits, such as the urge to stamp when she doesn't have expressive feet, and curl her lip over a non-existent fang. Biting the wrong nails. Shopping. I could go on ... As I said earlier, it's all good fun for me, and I hope for you.

There is one slippery consequence of a character who can amuse just by being herself, as it were. I know some readers skim through, enjoying the books for their humor, and not really seeing much else. That's fine. But what I write about in the Web Shifters' books, Esen's stories, is rather serious stuff. Learning to cope with tragedy and loss. Valuing friendship, including its sacrifices. Risking oneself for a greater good, while hoping to understand what that is. Reaching for compromise and accommodation as opposed to victory or conquest. These are all themes Esen lets me explore. It almost seems easier to do so, knowing there's the funny stuff, like a layer of camouflage in front of it all. I suspect many authors hate to be caught with their convictions showing.

I hope you enjoy *Hidden in Sight*, as Esen and Paul cope with a drastic change in their lives. Be assured, Esen has a plan. Several. Be warned, they're Esen's plans – well-meant, but never fool-proof.

May you have all the fun reading this book that I had writing it.