



Excerpt from “**The Only Thing to Fear—A Web Shifters Story**”

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I lifted my right paw, uncurling its useful toes with their thick callused knuckles and passably manicured clawtips, then depressed the button to start the encrypted recording.

“Hello. This is—whatever you know me as, my real name is Esen-alit-Quar, Esen for short, Es in a hurry or between friends.

“You’ve received this recording because friends is what I hope we’ll stay. The sort who trust one another, who share the truth. Paul, my first friend, taught me that.

“What I have to tell you might change your mind about being friends. It’s all right. I’ll understand. Just—please don’t be afraid.

“The truth is, I’m not what you see.

“Well, yes, I am, because whatever form I wear is me, which can be a bother sometimes, let me tell you, but...what I am? Is a little more complicated. I can’t show you. I’m supposed to hide my true form from aliens, even friends. It’s not prejudice. We’re private.

“‘We’ being Web-beings. I’m one of two left--in our bit of universe, anyway. We’re shapeshifters. Not the scary kind in the mythos of too many cultures, especially of humanoids which has always made me wonder—and doesn’t matter at this moment. Suffice to say that’s not us. We were originally creatures of space, consuming and using energy, manipulating our mass for survival. Now we live on worlds, like you, and expend our energy to transform our mass into the remembered structure of a sentient life-form. Yes, only sentient ones. Why? The first of our Web, Ersh, assimilated a form able to think and found herself obliged to continue to do so, a trait she gave the rest of us. It’s worked out for the best, in my opinion.

“Mind you, Ersh is now part of a moon, and I doubt she does any thinking there. She sacrificed herself for us in an attempt to defeat

our Enemy, a mindless Web-being of terrible appetite—that's why there's only two of us now.

“After all, the sweetest flesh is our own.

“I understand that can sound alarming, but it's normal for us. It's how Web-beings exchange information. We consume one another's flesh. Assimilate one another's memories. It's what we are.

“I assure you we don't consume anyone else. Yes, our Enemy did, but we don't. The Web of Esen exists to protect others. That's my Rule. Besides, plants provide excellent replacement web-mass and are easy to--

--the point being, our purpose is to keep you and all sentient species safe. Our Enemy is dead, but others might follow. We remain vigilant. My friends help, too. You don't have to, but you could, if you want.

“Of course, that's not all we do. My Web continues the task Ersh entrusted to us: to be living repositories of the accomplishments of more ephemeral species. We don't forget.

“And we live—longer. Let's leave it at that.

“So you see, there's nothing to fear. I, Esen, hope we can be friends. I--”

Ersh, I was a fool. I erased the recording with a stab of my clawtip and resisted the impulse to tuck my tail between my legs. What was I thinking? Hope wasn't enough. The truth about me wasn't something this particular being could handle. Yet.

If ever.

I tossed the device into the nearest recycler, waiting for the flash of green that meant my recorder was now so many disassembled molecules. I knew too many clever beings to think “erase” alone sufficient, especially after recent events.

It all started with the Library...