

## 11. Sard's Plan

For his home away from home, Sard chose a large slab of rock leaning at an angle against the solid part of the ridge. There was just enough space in the gap for him to lie full length and stare out the west-by-north facing back door—so to say—across the desert to watch for Clay Faces.

Or he could crawl in from the west-by-north and get a bit of afternoon sun on his face. The outlook at this angle was down and onto the beach. The storm had left behind a sizeable lagoon. He wouldn't mind seeing the famous mermen frolicking in it when they decided it was safe again to be outside.

The life-suit surprised him with a burst of errant color. Maybe caused by his errant thoughts and feelings? < Discharging excess energy in a I-am-safe situation. > So, another thing about the suit useful to know. What had possessed him to think he was ready to start gallivanting out in the wilderness?

Waking after he had inevitably fallen asleep while he sunned himself, his suit smugly let him know its condition. < My exterior colour, sand, shaded and sun-touched > Which was a great saving when he saw the many legs, bare, tall and small, walking up to the edge of the cliff.

*Thank you*, Sard thought at the suit. He allowed his gaze to travel up the legs, past the thigh-length skirts, and past the bare breasted chests in a hurry, to the faces. Could these be the rest of the mermen's tribe? Didn't look like any mer-people he'd ever imagined. The adults, all of them women, dragged various small kids back from the steep fall and sent them to sit on a bunch of rolled-up mats.

How good was it that he was still invisible? < You + I are continuous with the background > But which meant that because he was practically among them, he wouldn't be able to slide backward into the rock shelter without shifting the sand or his shadows. Better stay put.

No, he was wrong. One person *could* see him, a girl probably of an age with him and Srese. She stared at him with wide startled eyes. Someone called out, and she turned her head to attend. He watched her like a hawk. She moved away without saying anything about him, as far as he could tell, because the rest of the women continued to ignore him.

Her eyes were a sparkling green and he guessed her to be shorter than him by about half a head. Her hair was warm-dark, wavy, overlaid with silver. Her skin texture reminded him of the smooth inner layer of mulbry tree bark. And, she was bare breasted. His heart galumphed.

He hardly allowed his eyes to rove—he definitely didn't want the whites of his eyes to be seen by the flat-breasted older women—the girl's breasts, with rosebud nipples, were small and neat and separated by the bag-strap that she wore diagonally across her chest, with the bag sitting on her hip. She wore a ragged mini-skirt made of strips of a soft floppy fabric nothing like any sort of silk or tree fibre.

He stared, not breathing, while waiting to be noticed by the rest of the women or children. But they didn't. Nobody took any notice of him whatever. Nobody saw him except her. Vaguely he was aware he should be asking *why* she could see him.

Also, a stronger feeling was that surely he was due for some rest and recreation? He was getting desperate for relief from the work of living in reality. *Ten minutes holiday is all I ask.* He waited all of a minute for a sign from the universe to tell him his request was not granted.

*Nothing. Nix. Nada. No answer.* He chuckled silently. *It is all in who you ask and how you phrase it, Sard-Man.* He relaxed. His suit made him a magic man. And here were his players. He could finally dream up his future. The first step was watch watch watch and know his target. Figure of speech, that. No time now to think up a more appropriate word. Breathing lightly now he stared covertly at the women congregating at the lip of the cliff.

Or was that covetously? He chuckled again. He was on track. Bet the women discussed the state of the beach, or what was left of it. He'd been surprised too. Apart from the lagoon in the angle made by the cliff curving round at the south end, there was a narrow strip of sand along the foot of the ridge where it faced the waves. That strip was all that was left of dry land. Misstep and you might be sucked out to sea in the storm-driven backwash.

One of the women, with her hands around her mouth, shouted, "Coo-ee!" Another shrilled a long sequence of sounds. They attempted to contact someone at the caves? Sard filled in the details he couldn't see. By and by everyone sat down like they waited for the tide to ebb.

The three older women and the girl unrolled a large mat over them all. Protection from the sun was all he could come up with for a reason, though the wind still scudded busily among the waves.

Excitement gripped his belly when *his* girl—how he thought of her already—sat down nearest him, to hold up that corner of the mat. She drew it over her head, and down her curvy back with both hands, and lifted her sit-bones to anchor the mat under her. She glanced toward him again, sideways, seemingly to measure the distance between them.

She couldn't have done that accidentally. Heat in his abdomen. She must be as interested in him as he in her. It was like she'd already started to separate herself from the rest of them by showing so much interest in him. Too bad he couldn't creep closer. He shouldn't be discovered before he had the kite and knew how to use it escape with them both.

The woman under the next corner called out. "Ahni." The girl twisted round to attend to her. Telling him that her name was Ahni. He loved it that she had a name not in the Name Book. He imagined her in his arms, soaring high on the wind as they traveled to a place where they'd make their new lives.

The timing was excellent. What with the way the entertainments usually played out, Sard was pretty sure Gammy would keep Ahni and her people until they had been milked of all the novelty they presented. Sard would be using that time to practice the kite. He'd be ready for Ahni and waiting at the top of the path, when the women and children were turned away. As this was the only way back up onto the uplands.

The idea of leaving home was suddenly exciting. With her he wouldn't be lonely or an outcast because he'd—or rather they—would be the ones deciding where they'd go. She'd given him the best best motivation to leave.

