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illustrating **THE DEEP DOWN DRAGON**

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THE GOD NEXT DOOR



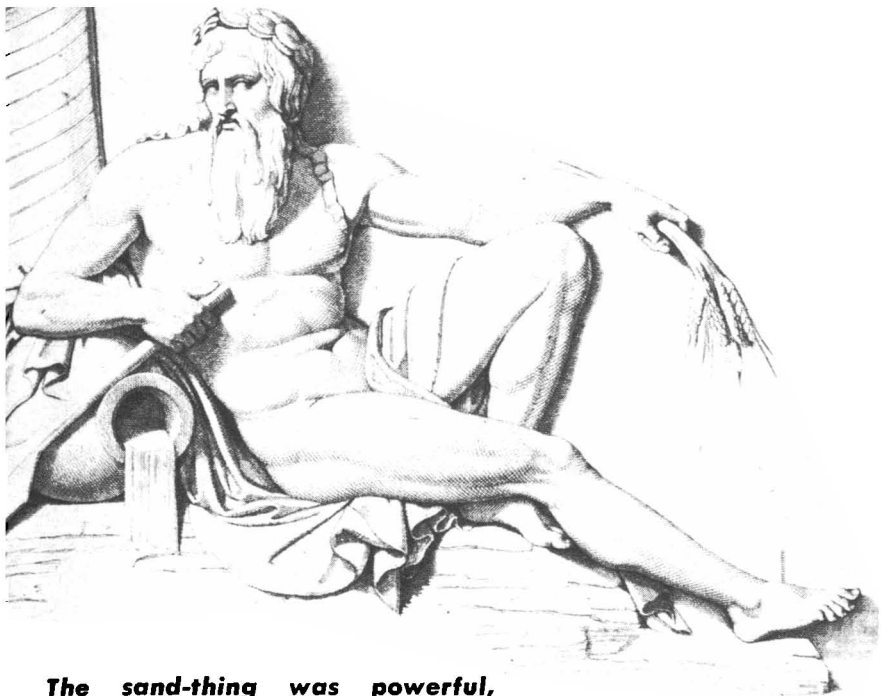
By **BILL DOEDE** Illustrated by **IVIE**

STINSON lay still in the sand where he fell, gloating over the success of his arrival.

He touched the pencil-line scar behind his ear where the cylinder was buried, marveling at the power stored there, power to fling him from earth to this fourth planet of the Centaurian system in an instant. It had happened so fast that he could al-

most feel the warm, humid Missouri air, though he was light years from Missouri.

He got up. A gray, funnel-shaped cloud of dust stood off to his left. This became disturbing, since there was scarcely enough wind to move his hair. He watched it, trying to recall what he might know about cyclones. But he knew little. Weather control made cyclones and other cli-



***The sand-thing was powerful,
lonely and strange. No doubt
it was a god — but who wasn't?***

matic phenomena on earth practically non-existent. The cloud did not move, though, except to spin on its axis rapidly, emitting a high-pitched, scarcely audible whine, like a high speed motor. He judged it harmless.

He stood on a wide valley floor between two mountain ranges. Dark clouds capped one peak of the mountains on his left. The sky was deep blue.

He tested the gravity by jumping up and down. Same as Earth gravity. The sun — no, not *the* sun. Not Sol. What should he call it, Alpha or Centaurus? Well, perhaps neither. He was here and Earth was somewhere up there. This was *the* sun of this particular solar system. He was right the first time.

The sun burned fiercely, although he would have said it was

about four o'clock in the afternoon, if this had been Earth. Not a tree, nor a bush, nor even a wisp of dry grass was in sight. Everywhere was desert.

The funnel of sand had moved closer and while he watched it, it seemed to drift in the wind — although there was no wind. Stinson backed away. It stopped. It was about ten feet tall by three feet in diameter at the base. Then Stinson backed away again. It was changing. Now it became a blue rectangle, then a red cube, a violet sphere.

He wanted to run. He wished Benjamin were here. Ben might have an explanation. "What am I afraid of?" he said aloud, "a few grains of sand blowing in the wind? A wind devil?"

He turned his back and walked away. When he looked up the wind devil was there before him. He looked back. Only one. It had moved. The sun shone obliquely, throwing Stinson's shadow upon the sand. The wind devil also had a shadow, although the sun shone through it and the shadow was faint. But it moved when the funnel moved. This was no illusion.

Again Stinson felt the urge to run, or to use the cylinder to project himself somewhere else, but he said, "No!" very firmly to himself. He was here to investigate, to determine if this planet was

capable of supporting life.

Life? Intelligence? He examined the wind devil as closely as he dared, but it was composed only of grains of sand. There was no core, no central place you could point to and say, here is the brain, or the nervous system. But then, how could a group of loosely spaced grains of sand possibly have a nervous system?

It was again going through its paces. Triangle, cube, rectangle, sphere. He watched, and when it became a triangle again, he smoothed a place in the sand and drew a triangle with his forefinger. When it changed to a cube he drew a square, a circle for a sphere, and so on. When the symbols were repeated he pointed to each in turn, excitement mounting. He became so absorbed in doing this that he failed to notice how the wind devil drew closer and closer, but when he inhaled the first grains of sand, the realization of what was happening dawned with a flash of fear. Instantly he projected himself a thousand miles away.

NOW he was in an area of profuse vegetation. It was twilight. As he stood beside a small creek, a chill wind blew from the northwest. He wanted to cover himself with the long leaves he found, but they were dry and

brittle, for here autumn had turned the leaves. Night would be cold.

He was not a woodsman. He doubted if he could build a fire without matches. So he followed the creek to where it flowed between two great hills. Steam vapors rose from a crevice. A cave was nearby and warm air flowed from its mouth. He went inside.

At first he thought the cave was small, but found instead that he was in a long narrow passageway. The current of warm air flowed toward him and he followed it, cautiously, stepping carefully and slowly. Then it was not quite so dark. Soon he stepped out of the narrow passageway into a great cavern with a high-vaulted ceiling.

The light source was a mystery. He left no shadow on the floor. A great crystal sphere hung from the ceiling, and he was curious about its purpose, but a great pool of steaming water in the center of the cavern drew his attention. He went close, to warm himself. A stone wall surrounding the pool was inscribed with intricate art work and indecipherable symbols.

Life. Intelligence. The planet was inhabited.

Should he give up and return to earth? Or was there room here for his people? Warming his

hands there over the great steaming pool he thought of Benjamin, and Straus, and Jamieson — all those to whom he had given cylinders, and who were now struggling for life against those who desired them.

He decided it would not be just, to give up so easily.

The wide plaza between the pool and cavern wall was smooth as polished glass. Statues lined the wall. He examined them.

The unknown artist had been clever. From one angle they were animals, from another birds, from a third they were vaguely humanoid creatures, glowering at him with primitive ferocity. The fourth view was so shocking he had to turn away quickly. No definable form or sculptured line was visible, yet he felt, or saw—he did not know which senses told him—the immeasurable gulf of a million years of painful evolution. Then nothing. It was not a curtain drawn to prevent him from seeing more.

There was no more.

HE stumbled toward the pool's wall and clutched for support, but his knees buckled. His hand slid down the wall, over the ancient inscriptions. He sank to the floor. Before he lost consciousness he wondered, fleetingly, if a lethal instrument was in the statue.

He woke with a ringing in his ears, feeling drugged and sluggish. Sounds came to him. He opened his eyes.

The cavern was crowded. These creatures were not only humanoid, but definitely human, although more slight of build than earth people. The only difference he could see at first sight was that they had webbed feet. All were dressed from the waist down only, in a shimmering skirt that sparkled as they moved. They walked with the grace of ballet dancers, moving about the plaza, conversing in a musical language with no meaning for Stinson. The men were dark-skinned, the women somewhat lighter, with long flowing hair, wide lips and a beauty that was utterly sensual.

He was in chains! They were small chains, light weight, of a metal that looked like aluminum. But all his strength could not break them.

They saw him struggling. Two of the men came over and spoke to him in the musical language.

"My name is Stinson," he said, pointing to himself. "I'm from the planet Earth."

They looked at each other and jabbered some more.

"Look," he said, "Earth. E-A-R-T-H, Earth." He pointed upward, described a large circle, then another smaller, and show-

ed how Earth revolved around the sun.

One of the men poked him with a stick, or tube of some kind. It did not hurt, but angered him. He left the chains by his own method of travel, and reappeared behind the two men. They stared at the place where he had been. The chains tinkled musically. He grasped the shoulder of the offender, spun him around and slapped his face.

A cry of consternation rose from the group, echoing in the high ceilinged cavern. "SBTL!" it said, "ZBTL . . . XBTL . . . zbt!"

The men instantly prostrated themselves before him. The one who had poked Stinson with the stick rose, and handed it to him. Still angered, Stinson grasped it firmly, with half a notion to break it over his head. As he did so, a flash of blue fire sprang from it. The man disappeared. A small cloud of dust settled slowly to the floor.

Disintegrated!

Stinson's face drained pale, and suddenly, unaccountably, he was ashamed because he had no clothes.

"I didn't mean to kill him!" he cried. "I was angry, and . . ."

Useless. They could not understand. For all he knew, they might think he was threatening them. The object he had thought of as a stick was in reality a

long metal tube, precisely machined, with a small button near one end.

This weapon was completely out of place in a culture such as this. Or was it? What did he know of these people? Very little. They were humanoid. They had exhibited human emotions of anger, fear and, that most human of all characteristics, curiosity. But up to now the tube and the chain was the only evidence of an advanced technology, unless the ancient inscriptions in the stone wall of the pool, and the statues lining the wall were evidences.

THERE was a stirring among the crowd. An object like a pallet was brought, carried by four of the women. They laid it at his feet, and gestured for him to sit. He touched it cautiously, then sat.

Instantly he sprang to his feet. There, at the cavern entrance, the wind devil writhed and undulated in a brilliant harmony of colors. It remained in one spot, though, and he relaxed somewhat.

One of the women came toward him, long golden hair flowing, firm breasts dipping slightly at each step. Her eyes held a language all their own, universal. She pressed her body against him and bore him to the pallet, her kisses fire on his face.

Incongruously, he thought of Benjamin back on earth, and all the others with cylinders, who might be fighting for their lives at this moment. He pushed her roughly aside.

She spoke, and he understood! Her words were still the same gibberish, but now he knew their meaning. Somehow he knew also that the wind devil was responsible for his understanding.

"You do not want me?" she said sadly. "Then kill me."

"Why should I kill you?"

She shrugged her beautiful shoulders. "It is the way of the Gods," she said. "If you do not, then the others will."

He took the tube-weapon in his hands, careful not to touch the button. "Don't be afraid. I didn't mean to kill the man. It was an accident. I will protect you."

She shook her head. "One day they will find me alone, and they'll kill me."

"Why?"

She shrugged. "I have not pleased you."

"On the contrary, you have. There is a time and place for everything, though."

Suddenly a great voice sounded in the cavern, a voice with no direction. It came from the ceiling, the floor, the walls, the steaming pool. It was in the language of the web-footed people;

it was in his own tongue. "No harm must come to this woman. The God with fingers on his feet has decreed this."

Those in the cavern looked at the woman with fear and respect. She kissed Stinson's feet. Two of the men came and gave her a brilliant new skirt. She smiled at him, and he thought he had never seen a more beautiful face.

THE GREAT, bodiless voice sounded again, but those in the cavern went about their activities. They did not hear.

"Who are you?"

Stinson looked at the wind devil, since it could be no one else speaking, and pointed to himself. "Me?"

"Yes."

"I am Stinson, of the planet Earth."

"Yes, I see it in your mind, now. You want to live here, on this planet."

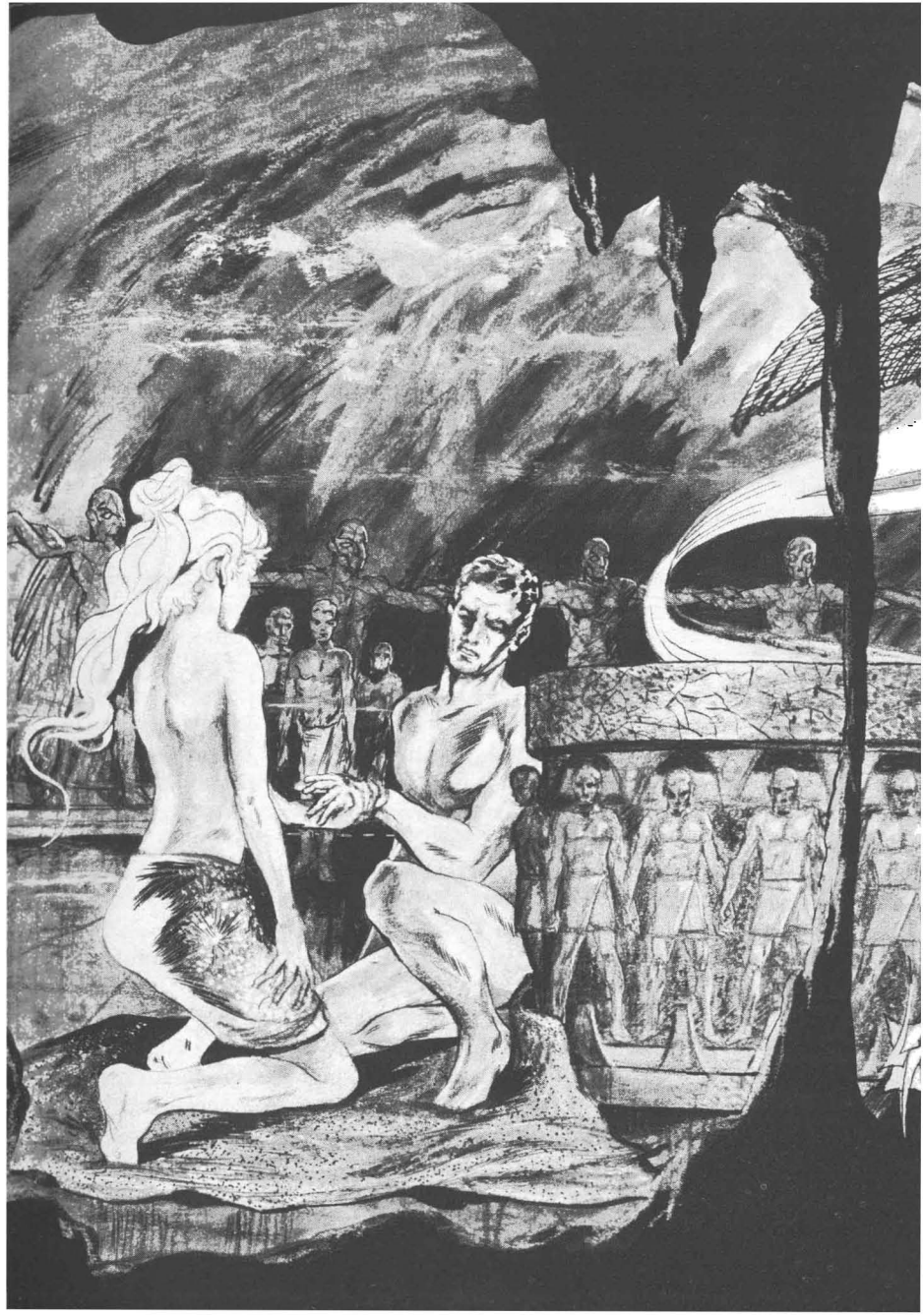
"Then you must know where I came from, and how."

"I do not understand how. You have a body, a physical body composed of atoms. It is impossible to move a physical body from one place to another by a mere thought and a tiny instrument, yet you have done so. You deserted me out in the desert."

"I deserted you?" Stinson cried angrily, "You tried to kill me!"

"I was attempting communica-





tion. Why should I kill you?"

He was silent a moment, looking at the people in the cavern. "Perhaps because you feared I would become the God of these people in your place."

Stinson felt a mental shrug. "It is of no importance. When they arrived on this planet I attempted to explain that I was not a God, but the primitive is not deeply buried in them. They soon resorted to emotion rather than reason. It is of no importance."

"I'd hardly call them primitive, with such weapons."

"The tube is not of their technology. That is, they did not make it directly. These are the undersirables, the incorrigibles, the nonconformists from the sixth planet. I permit them here because it occupies my time, to watch them evolve."

"You should live so long."

"Live?" the wind devil said. "Oh, I see your meaning. I'd almost forgotten. You are a strange entity. You travel by a means even I cannot fully understand, yet you speak of time as if some event were about to take place. I believe you think of death. I see your physical body has deteriorated since yesterday. Your body will cease to exist, almost as soon as those of the sixth planet peoples. I am most interested in you. You will bring your people, and live here."

"I haven't decided. There are these web-footed people, who were hostile until they thought I was a God. They have destructive weapons. Also, I don't understand you. I see you as a cone of sand which keeps changing color and configuration. Is it your body? Where do you come from? Is this planet populated with your kind?"

The wind devil hesitated.

"Where do I originate? It seems I have always been. You see this cavern, the heated pool, the statues, the inscriptions. Half a million years ago my people were as you. That is, they lived in physical bodies. Our technology surpassed any you have seen. The tube these webfoots use is a toy by comparison. Our scientists found the ultimate nature of physical law. They learned to separate the mind from the body. Then my people set a date. Our entire race was determined to free itself from the confines of the body. The date came."

"What happened?"

"I do not know. I alone exist. I have searched all the levels of time and matter from the very beginning. My people are gone. Sometimes it almost comes to me, why they are gone. And this is contrary to the greatest law of all—that an entity, once in existence, can never cease to exist."

STINSON was silent, thinking of the endless years of searching through the great gulf of time. His eyes caught sight of the woman, reclining now on the pallet. The men had left her and stood in groups, talking, glancing at him, apparently free of their awe and fear already.

The woman looked at him, and she was not smiling. "Please ask the Sand God," she said, "to speak to my people again. Their fear of him does not last. When He is gone they will probably kill us."

"As for the webfoots," the wind devil, or Sand God, said, "I will destroy them. You and your people will have the entire planet."

"Destroy them?" Stinson asked, incredulously, "all these people? They have a right to live like any one else."

"Right? What is it — 'right'? They are entities. They exist, therefore they always will. My people are the only entities who ever died. To kill the body is unimportant."

"No. You misunderstand. Listen, you spoke of the greatest law. Your law is a scientific hypothesis. It has to do with what comes after physical existence, not with existence itself. The greatest law is this, that an entity, once existing, must not be harmed in any way. To do so

changes the most basic structure of nature."

The Sand God did not reply. The great bodiless, directionless voice was silent, and Stinton felt as if he had been taken from some high place and set down in a dark canyon. The cone of sand was the color of wood ashes. It pulsed erratically, like a great heart missing a beat now and then. The web-footed people milled about restlessly. The woman's eyes pleaded.

When he looked back, the Sand God was gone.

Instantly a new note rose in the cavern. The murmur of unmistakable mob fury ran over the webfoots. Several of the men approached the woman with hatred in their voices. He could not understand the words now.

But he understood her. "They'll kill me!" she cried.

Stinson pointed the disintegrating weapon at them and yelled. They dropped back. "We'll have to get outside," he told her. "This mob will soon get out of hand. Then the tube won't stop them. They will rush in. I can't kill them all at once, even if I wanted to. And I don't."

Together they edged toward the cavern entrance, ran quickly up the inclined passageway, and came out into crisp, cold air. The morning sun was reflected from a million tiny mirrors on

the rocks, the trees and grass. A silver thaw during the night had covered the whole area with a coating of ice. Stinson shivered. The woman handed him a skirt she had thoughtfully brought along from the cavern. He took it, and they ran down the slippery path leading away from the entrance. From the hiding place behind a large rock they watched, as several web-footed men emerged into the sunlight. They blinked, covered their eyes, and jabbered musically among themselves. One slipped and fell on the ice. They re-entered the cave.

STINSON donned the shimmering skirt, smiling as he did so. The others should see him now. Benjamin and Straus and Jamieson. They would laugh. And Ben's wife, Lisa, she would give her little-girl laugh, and probably help him fasten the skirt. It had a string, like a tobacco pouch, which was tied around the waist. It helped keep him warm.

He turned to the woman. "I don't know what I'll do with you, but now that we're in trouble together, we may as well introduce ourselves. My name is Stinson."

"I am Sybtl," she said.

"Syb-tl." He tried to imitate her musical pronunciation. "A very nice name."

She smiled, then pointed to

the cavern. "When the ice is gone, they will come out and follow us."

"We'd better make tracks."

"No," she said, "we must run, and make no tracks."

"Okay, Sis," he said.

"Sis?"

"That means, sister."

"I am not your sister. I am your wife."

"What?"

"Yes. When a man protects a woman from harm, it is a sign to all that she is his chosen. Otherwise, why not let her die? You are a strange God."

"Listen, Sybtl," he said desperately, "I am not a God and you are not my wife. Let's get that straight."

"But . . ."

"No buts. Right now we'd better get out of here."

He took her hand and they ran, slid, fell, picked themselves up again, and ran. He doubted the wisdom of keeping her with him. Alone, the webfoots were no match for him. He could travel instantly to any spot he chose. But with Sybtl it was another matter; he was no better than any other man, perhaps not so good as some because he was forty, and never had been an athlete.

How was he to decide if this planet was suitable for his people, hampered by a woman, slinking

through a frozen wilderness like an Indian? But the woman's hand was soft. He felt strong knowing she depended on him.

Anyway, he decided, pursuit was impossible. They left no tracks on the ice. They were safe, unless the webfoots possessed talents unknown to him.

So they followed the path leading down from the rocks, along the creek with its tumbling water. Frozen, leafless willows clawed at their bodies. The sun shone fiercely in a cloudless sky. Already water ran in tiny rivulets over the ice. The woman steered him to the right, away from the creek.

STINSON'S bare feet were numb from walking on ice. Christ, he thought, what am I doing here, anyway? He glanced down at Sybtl and remembered the webfoots. He stopped, tempted to use his cylinder and move to a warmer, less dangerous spot.

The woman pulled on his arm. "We must hurry!"

He clutched the tube-weapon. "How many shots in this thing?"

"Shots?"

"How often can I use it?"

"As often as you like. It is good for fifty years. Kaatr—he is the one you destroyed—brought it from the ship when we came. Many times he has used it unwisely."

"When did you come?"

"Ten years ago. I was a child."

"I thought only criminals were brought here."

She nodded. "Criminals, and their children."

"When will your people come again?"

She shook her head. "Never. They are no longer my people. They have disowned us."

"And because of me even those in the cavern have disowned you."

Suddenly she stiffened beside him. There, directly in their path, stood the Sand God. It was blood red now. It pulsed violently. The great voice burst forth.

"Leave the woman!" it demanded angrily. "The webfoots are nearing your position."

"I cannot leave her. She is helpless against them."

"What form of primitive stupidity are you practicing now? Leave, or they will kill you."

Stinson shook his head.

The Sand God pulsed more violently than before. Ice melted in a wide area around it. Brown, frozen grass burned to ashes.

"You will allow them to kill you, just to defend her life? What business is it of yours if she lives or dies? My race discarded such primitive logic long before it reached your level of development."

"Yes," Stinson said, "and your race no longer exists."

The Sand God became a sphere of blue flame. A wave of intense heat drove them backward. "Earthman," the great voice said, "go back to your Earth. Take your inconsistencies with you. Do not come here again to infect my planet with your primitive ideas. The webfoots are not as intelligent as you, but they are sane. If you bring your people here, I shall destroy you all."

The sphere of blue fire screamed away across the frozen wilderness, and the thunder of its passing shook the ground and echoed among the lonely hills.

SYBTL shivered against his arm. "The Sand God is angry," she said. "My people tell how he was angry once before, when we first came here. He killed half of us and burned the ship that brought us. That is how Kaatr got the tube-weapon. It was the only thing the Sand God didn't burn, that and the skirts. Then, when he had burned the ship, the Sand God went to the sixth planet and burned two of the largest cities, as a warning that no more of us must come here."

Well, Stinson said to himself, that does it. We are better off on Earth. We can't fight a monster like him.

Sybtl touched his arm. "Why did the Sand God come? He did not speak."

"He spoke to me."

"I did not hear."

"Yes, I know now. His voice sounds like thunder in the sky, but it is a voice that speaks only in the mind. He said I must leave this planet."

She glanced at him with suddenly awakened eyes, as if thinking of it for the first time. "Where is your ship?"

"I have no ship."

"Then he will kill you." She touched her fingers on his face. "I am sorry. It was all for me."

"Don't worry. The Sand God travels without a ship, why shouldn't I?"

"Now?"

"As soon as you are safe. Come."

Steam rose from the burned area, charred like a rocket launching pit. They stepped around it carefully. Stinson felt warm air, but there was no time, now, to warm cold feet or dwell on the vagaries of Sand Gods.

Together they crossed the narrow valley. Sybtl led him toward a tall mound of rock. Here they came to the creek again, which flowed into a small canyon. They climbed the canyon wall. Far away, small figures moved. The webfoots were on their trail.

She drew him into a small cave. It was heated, like the great cavern, but held no walled pool nor mysterious lighting. But

it was warm, and the small entrance made an excellent vantage point for warding off attack.

"They will not find us . . ."

A high-pitched keening burst suddenly around them. Stinson knew they had heard, or felt the sound for some time, that now its frequency was in an audible range.

"The Sand God," Sybtl said. "Sometimes he plays among the clouds. He makes it rain in a dry summer, or sometimes warms the whole world for days at a time in winter, so the snow melts and the grass begins to green. Then he tires and lets winter come back again. He is the loneliest God in the universe."

"What makes you think he's lonely?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I just know. But he's an angry God now. See those clouds piling in the East? Soon they will hide the sun. Then he will make them churn and boil, like river whirlpools in spring. At least he does this when he plays. Who knows what he will do when he's angry?"

"The Sand God isn't doing this," Stinson said. "It's only a storm."

She covered his lips with her fingers. "Don't say that. He may hear you and be more angry."

"But it is, don't you see? You give him powers he does not possess."

Sybtl shook her head and stroked his face with her long, slim fingers. "Poor little God-with-fingers-on-his-feet," she said. "You do not understand. The Sand God is terrible, even when he plays. See the lightning? It is blue. The lightning of a storm that comes by itself is not blue. He is running around the world on feet like the rockets of space ships, and when he strikes the clouds, blue fire shoots away."

THE CLOUDS continued to build on one another. Soon the blue flashes of lightning extended across the sky from horizon to horizon. The earth trembled. Sybtl moved closer, trembling also.

"He never did this before," she said. "He never made the earth shake before."

Great boulders crashed down the canyon walls and dropped into the creek. They dared not move from the cave, although death seemed certain if they stayed.

"I'll leave for a moment," he said. "I'll be back soon."

"You're leaving?" There was panic in her voice.

"Only for a moment."

"And you won't come back. You will go to your world."

"No. I'll be back."

"Promise? No, don't promise. The promises of Gods often are

forgotten before the sounds die away."

"I'll be back."

He disappeared at once, giving her no chance to object again, and went to the desert of sand, where he had first arrived on the planet. He wanted to see if the storm were world-wide.

Stinson had never been in a sand storm before, even on Earth. He could not breathe. He could not see. Bullets of sand stung his skin. Bullets of sand shot into his eyes. Clouds of sand howled around him. He fell, and the wind rolled him over and over in the sand like a tumbleweed. The skirt flew up around his face. He could not get up again.

He returned to the cave.

Soon after, while they sat huddled together, watching the chaos of tumbling rocks, lightning, and driving rain, the high-pitched keening came again. A sphere of blue fire appeared in the east. Its brilliance put the lightning to shame. It bore down on the cave swiftly, purposefully. Stinson prepared himself to leave. In spite of his desire to protect Sybtl, it was useless to get himself killed when he was powerless to help her. But at the last moment it veered off.

"Fiend!" Stinson screamed the word, vaguely marvelling at his own fury.

The blue sphere turned and came back.

"Monster!"

Again.

"Murderer!"

"Adolescent!"

This time it kept going. The rain and wind ceased. Lightning stopped. Thunder rumbled distantly. Clouds disappeared. Stinson and Sybtl emerged from the cave.

There was no longer a question of attack from the webfoots, the storm had taken care of that. The fierce sun began its work of drying rocks and throwing shadows and coaxing life out into the open again. Down in the canyon a bird sang, a lonely, cheerful twitter.

"The Sand God is tired," Sybtl said. "He is not angry now. I'm glad. Perhaps he will let you stay."

"No. Even if he allowed it, I couldn't stay. My people could never live here with a God who is half devil."

THE CONE of sand suddenly appeared. It stood in the canyon, its base on a level with the cave. It was quiet. It was dull gray in color. It exuded impressions of death, of hopeful words solemnly spoken over lowered coffins, of cold earth and cold space, of dank, wet catacombs, of creeping, crawling nether things.

The bird's twitter stopped abruptly.

"Earthman," the Sand God said, as if he were about to make a statement.

Stinson ignored him. He glanced down at Sybtl, who sensed that this was a time for good-bys. He thought, perhaps I can stay here alone with her. The webfoots might find us, or the Sand God might destroy us in one of his fits, but it might be worth it.

"Don't go," she said. "Not yet."

"Earthman, hear me."

"I hear you."

"Why does your mind shrink backward?"

"I've decided not to bring my people here."

"You decided?"

"Certainly," Stinson said boldly. "Call it rationalization, if you wish. You ordered us away; and I have several good reasons for not coming here if the door was open."

"I've changed my mind. You will be welcomed."

"Listen to that, will you?" Stinson said angrily. "Just listen! You set yourself up as a God for the webfoots. You get them eating out of your hand. Then what do you do? You throw a fit. Yes, a fit! Like an adolescent. Worse."

"Earthman, wait . . ."

"No!" Stinson shot back. "You've owned this planet for a

million years. You have brooded here alone since before my people discovered fire, and in all those ages you never learned self-control. I can't subject my people to the whims of an entity who throws a planetary fit when it pleases him."

Stinson relaxed. He'd had his say. Sybtl trembled beside him. A small mammal, round, furry, hopped by, sniffing inquisitively.

Sybtl said, "Is the Sand God happy?" She shook her head. "No, he is not happy. He is old, old, old. I can feel it. My people say that when one gets too old it is well to die. But Gods never die, do they? I would not like to be a God."

"Stinson," the Sand God said. "You said I was adolescent. You are correct. Do you remember I told you how my people, the entire race, left their bodies at the same time? Do you imagine all of us were adults?"

"I suppose not. Sounds reasonable. How old were you?"

"Chronologically, by our standards, I was nine years old."

"But you continued to develop after . . ."

"No."

STINSON tried to imagine it. At first there must have been a single voice crying into a monstrous emptiness, "Mother, where are you? *MOTHER!* Where is

everyone?" A frenzied searching of the planet, the solar system, the galaxy. Then a returning to the planet. Empty . . . Change. Buildings, roads, bridges weathering slowly. Such a race would have built of durable metal. Durable? Centuries, eons passed. Buildings crumbled to dust, dust blew away. Bridges eroded, fell, decomposed into basic elements. The shape of constellations changed. All trace of civilization passed except in the cavern of the heated pool. Constellations disappeared, new patterns formed in the night sky. The unutterably total void of time— **FIVE HUNDRED THOUSAND YEARS!**

And a nine-year-old child brooding over an empty world.

"I don't understand why your development stopped," Stinson said.

"Nor do I. But perhaps . . . well, I sense that I would continue, if you brought your people here. You have already taught me the

value of life. There is a oneness, a bond that ties each living thing to every other living thing. It is a lesson my people never knew. Select any portion of this planet that suits you. Take the web-footed woman for your wife. Have children. I promise never to harm you in any way."

"The webfoots?"

"You and they shall share the planet."

The Sand God disappeared. Sybtl said, "Is the Sand God angry again?"

"No, he is not angry."

"I'm glad. You will leave now?"

"No. This is my home."

She laughed softly. "You are a strange God."

"Listen," he said, "I am not a God. Get that through your head."

She drew him into the cave. Her lips were cool and sweet. The cave was pleasantly warm.

— **BILL DOEDE**