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Editor: ROBERT W. LOWNDES

Associate MARIE A. PARK

Art Director: MILTON LUROS

Editors: JAMES D. SIMONS

COVER BY FREAS •

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THE SILENT COLONY

by **Bob Silverberg**

SKRID, Emerak, and Ullowa drifted through the dark night of space, searching the worlds that passed below them for some sign of their own kind. The urge to wander had come over them, as it does inevitably to all inhabitants of the Ninth World. They had been drifting through space for eons; but time is no barrier to immortals, and they were patient searchers.

"I think I feel something," said Emerak; "the Third World is giving off signs of life."

They had visited the thriving cities of the Eighth World, and the struggling colonies of the Seventh, and the experienced Skrid had led them to the little-known settlements on the moons of the giant Fifth World. But now they were far from home.

"You're mistaken, youngster," said Skrid. "There can't be any life on a planet so close to the sun as the Third World — think of how warm it is!"

Emerak turned bright white with rage. "Can't you *feel* the life down

there? It's not much, but it's there, maybe you're too old, Skrid."

Skrid ignored the insult. "I think we should turn back, we're putting ourselves in danger by going so close to the sun. We've seen enough."

"No, Skrid, I detect life below." Emerak blazed angrily. "And just because you're leader of this triad doesn't mean that you know everything. It's just that your form is more complex than ours, and it'll only be a matter of time until —"

"Quiet, Emerak." It was the calm voice of Ullowa. "Skrid, I think the hothead's right. I'm picking up weak impressions from the Third World myself; there may be some primitive life-forms evolving there. We'll never forgive ourselves if we turn back now."

"But the sun, Ullowa, the sun! If we go too close —" Skrid was silent, and the three drifted on through the void. After a while he said, "All right, let's investigate."

The three accordingly changed their direction and began to head for the Third World. They spiraled

slowly down through space until the planet hung before them, a mottled bowl spinning endlessly.

Invisibly they slipped down and into its atmosphere, gently drifting toward the planet below. They strained to pick up signs of life, and as they approached the life-impulses grew stronger. Emerak cried out vindictively that Skrid should listen to him more often. They knew now, without doubt, that their kind of life inhabited the planet.

"Hear that, Skrid? Listen to it, old one."

"All right, Emerak," the elder being said, "you've proved your point. I never claimed to be infallible."

"These are pretty strange thought-impressions coming up, Skrid. Listen to them, they have no minds down there," said Ullowa. "They don't think."

"Fine," exulted Skrid. "We can teach them the ways of civilization and raise them to our level. It shouldn't be hard, when time is ours."

"Yes," Ullowa agreed. "they're so mindless that they'll be putty in our hands. Skrid's Colony, we'll call the planet. I can just see the way the Council will go for this. A new colony, discovered by the noted adventurer Skrid, and two fearless companions —"

"Skrid's Colony, I like the sound of that," said Skrid. "Look, there's a drifting colony of them now, falling to earth. Let's join them

and make contact, here's our chance to begin."

THEY entered the colony and drifted slowly to the ground among them. Skrid selected a place where a heap of them lay massed together, and made a skilled landing, touching all six of his delicately-constructed limbs to the ground and sinking almost thankfully into a position of repose. Ullowa and Emerak followed and landed nearby.

"I can't detect any minds among them," complained Emerak, frantically searching through the beings near him. "They look just like us — that is, as close a resemblance as is possible for one of us to have for another. But they don't think."

Skrid sent a prying beam of thought into the heap on which he was lying. He entered first one, then another, of the inhabitants.

"Very strange," he reported. "I think they've just been born, many of them have vague memories of the liquid state, and some can recall as far back as the vapor state. I think we've stumbled over something important, thanks to Emerak."

"This is wonderful!" Ullowa said. "Here's our opportunity to study newborn entities first-hand."

"It's a relief to find some people younger than yourself," Emerak said sardonically. "I'm so used to being the baby of the group that it feels peculiar to have all these infants around."

"It's quite glorious," Ullowa said, as he propelled himself over the ground to where Skrid was examining one of the beings. "It hasn't been for a million ten-years that a newborn has appeared on our world, and here we are with billions of them all around."

"Two million ten-years, Ullowa," Skrid corrected. "Emerak here is of the last generation. And no need for any more, either, not while the mature entities live forever, barring accidents. But this is a big chance for us — we can make a careful study of these newborn ones, and perhaps set up a rudimentary culture here, and report to the council once these babies have learned to govern themselves. We can start completely from scratch on the Third Planet. This discovery will rank with Kodranik's vapor theory!"

"I'm glad you allowed me to come," said Emerak. "It isn't often that a youngster like me gets a chance to —" Emerak's voice tailed off in a cry of amazement and pain.

"Emerak?" questioned Skrid. There was no reply.

"Where did the youngster go? What happened?" Ullowa said.

"Some fool stunt, I suppose. That little speech of his was too good to be true, Ullowa."

"No, I can't seem to locate him anywhere. Can you? Uh, Skrid! Help me! I'm — I'm — Skrid, it's killing me!"

The sense of pain that burst from

Ullowa was very real, and it left Skrid trembling. "Ullowa! Ullowa!"

Skrid felt fear for the first time in more cons than he could remember, and the unfamiliar fright-sensation disturbed his sensitively balanced mind. "Emerak! Ullowa! Why don't you answer?"

Was this the end, Skrid thought, the end of everything? Are we going to perish here after so many years of life? To die alone and unattended, on a dismal planet billions of miles from home? Death was a concept too alien for him to accept.

He called again, his impulses stronger, this time. "Emerak! Ullowa! Where are you?"

In panic, he shot beams of thought all around, but the only radiations he picked up were the mindless ones of the newly-born.

"Ullowa!"

There was no answer, and Skrid began to feel his fragile body disintegrating. The limbs he had been so proud of — so complex and finely traced — began to blur and twist. He sent out one more frantic cry, feeling the weight of his great age, and sensing the dying thoughts of the newly-born around him. Then he melted and trickled away over the heap, while the newborn snowflakes of the Third World watched uncomprehending, even as their own doom was upon them. The sun was beginning to climb over the horizon, and its deadly warmth beat down.

