



Upstarts

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*Earth was being bet on to break
her blockade ... but what was the
purse ... and who was to collect?*

The sight of an Earthman on Vega III, where it was impossible for an outlander to be, brought angry crowds to surround John Crownwall as he strode toward the palace of Viceroy Tronn Ffallk, ruler of Sector XII of the Universal Holy Empire of Sunda. He ignored the snarling, the spitting, the waving of boneless prehensile fingers, as he ignored the heavy gravity and heavier air of the unfamiliar planet.

John Crownwall, florid, red-headed and bulky, considered himself to be a bold man. But here, surrounded by this writhing, slithering mass of eight-foot creatures, he felt distinctly unhappy. Crownwall had heard about creatures that slavered, but he had never before seen it done. These humanoids had large mouths and sharp teeth, and they unquestionably slavered. He wished he knew more about them. If they carried out the threats of their present attitude, Earth would have to send Marshall to replace him. And if Crownwall couldn't do the job, thought Crownwall, then it was a sure bet that Marshall wouldn't have a chance.

He climbed the great ramp, with its deeply carved Greek key design, toward the mighty entrance gate of the palace. His manner demonstrated an elaborate air of unconcern that he felt sure was entirely wasted on these monsters. The clashing teeth of the noisiest of them were only inches from the quivering flesh of his back as he reached the upper level. Instantly, and unexpectedly to Crownwall, the threatening crowd dropped back fearfully, so that he walked the last fifty meters alone.

Crownwall all but sagged with relief. A pair of guards, their purple hides smoothly polished and gleaming with oil, crossed their ceremonial pikes in front of him as he approached the entrance.

“And just what business do you have here, stranger?” asked the senior of the guards, his speaking orifice framing with difficulty the sibilances of Universal Galactic.

“What business *would* I have at the Viceroy's Palace?” asked Crownwall. “I want to see Ffallk.”

“Mind your tongue,” growled the guard. “If you mean His Effulgence, Right Hand of the Glorious Emperor, Hereditary Ruler of the Seventy Suns, Viceroy of the Twelfth Sector of the Universal Holy Empire”—Universal Galactic had a full measure of ceremonial words—“he sees only those whom he summons. If you know what's good for you, you'll get out of here while you can still walk. And if you run fast enough, maybe you can even get away from that crowd out there, but I doubt it.”

“Just tell him that a man has arrived from Earth to talk to him. He'll summon me fast enough. Meanwhile, my highly polished friends, I'll just wait here, so why don't you put those heavy pikes down?”

Crownwall sat on the steps, puffed alight a cigarette, and blew expert smoke rings toward the guards.

An elegant courtier, with elaborately jeweled harness, bustled from inside the palace,

obviously trying to present an air of strolling nonchalance. He gestured fluidly with a graceful tentacle. "You!" he said to Crownwall. "Follow me. His Effulgence commands you to appear before him at once." The two guards withdrew their pikes and froze into immobility at the sides of the entrance.

Crownwall stamped out his smoke and ambled after the hurrying courtier along tremendous corridors, through elaborate waiting rooms, under guarded doorways, until he was finally bowed through a small curtained arch.

At the far side of the comfortable, unimpressive room, a plump thing, hide faded to a dull violet, reclined on a couch. Behind him stood a heavy and pompous appearing Vegan in lordly trappings. They examined Crownwall with great interest for a few moments.

"It's customary to genuflect when you enter the Viceroy's presence," said the standing one at last. "But then I'm told you're an Earthling. I suppose we can expect you to be ignorant of those niceties customary among civilized peoples."

"It's all right, Ggaran," said the Viceroy languidly. He twitched a tentacle in a beckoning gesture. "Come closer, Earthling. I bid you welcome to my capital. I have been looking forward to your arrival for some time."

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Crownwall put his hands in his pockets. "That's hardly possible," he said. "It was only decided yesterday, back on Earth, that I would be the one to make the trip here. Even if you could spy through buildings on Earth from space, which I doubt, your communications system can't get the word through that fast."

"Oh, I didn't mean *you* in particular," the Vegan said with a negligent wave. "Who can tell one Earthling from another? What I meant was that I expected someone from Earth to break through our blockade and come here. Most of my advisors—even Ggaran here—thought it couldn't be done, but I never doubted that you'd manage it. Still, if you were on your home planet only yesterday, that's astonishing even to me. Tell me, how did you manage to get here so fast, and without even alerting my detection web?"

"You're doing the talking," said Crownwall. "If you wanted someone from Earth to come here to see you, why did you put the cordon around Earth? And why did you drop a planet-buster in the Pacific Ocean, and tell us that it was triggered to go off if we tried to use the distorter drive? That's hardly the action of somebody who expects visitors."

Ffallk glanced up at Ggaran. "I told you that Earthlings were unbelievably bold." He turned back to Crownwall. "If you couldn't come to me in spite of the trifling inconveniences I put in your way, your presence here would be useless to both of us. But you did come, so I can tell you that although I am the leader of one of the mightiest peoples in the Galaxy, whereas there are scarcely six billions of you squatting on one minor planet, we still need each other. Together, there is nothing we can't do."

“I'm listening,” said Crownwall.

“We offer you partnership with us to take over the rule of the Galaxy from the Sunda—the so-called Master Race.”

“It would hardly be an equal partnership, would it, considering that there are so many more of you than there are of us?”

His Effulgence twitched his ear stalks in amusement. “I'm Viceroy of one of the hundred Sectors of the Empire. I rule over a total of a hundred Satrapies; these average about a hundred Provinces each. Provinces consist, in general, of about a hundred Clusters apiece, and every Cluster has an average of a hundred inhabited solar systems. There are more inhabited planets in the Galaxy than there are people on your single world. I, personally, rule three hundred trillion people, half of them of my own race. And yet I tell you that it would be an equal partnership.”

“I don't get it. Why?”

“Because you came to me.”

Crownwall shrugged. “So?”

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The Vegan reached up and engulfed the end of a drinking tube with his eating orifice. “You upstart Earthlings are a strange and a frightening race,” he said. “Frightening to the Sunda, especially. When you showed up in the spaceways, it was decreed that you had to be stopped at once. There was even serious discussion of destroying Earth out of hand, while it is still possible.

“Your silly little planet was carefully examined at long range in a routine investigation just about fifty thousand years ago. There were at that time three different but similar racial strains of pulpy bipeds, numbering a total of perhaps a hundred thousand individuals. They showed many signs of an ability to reason, but a complete lack of civilization. While these creatures could by no means be classed among the intelligent races, there was a general expectation, which we reported to the Sunda, that they would some day come to be numbered among the Servants of the Emperor. So we let you alone, in order that you could develop in your own way, until you reached a high enough civilization to be useful—if you were going to.

“Intelligence is very rare in the Galaxy. In all, it has been found only fifteen times. The other races we have watched develop, and some we have actively assisted to develop. It took the quickest of them just under a million years. One such race we left uncontrolled too long—but no matter.

“You Earthlings, in defiance of all expectation and all reason, have exploded into space. You have developed in an incredibly short space of time. But even that isn't the most disconcerting item of your development. As an Earthling, you have heard of the details of the first expedition of your people into space, of course?”

“*Heard* about it?” exclaimed Crownwall. “I was *on* it.” He settled down comfortably on a couch, without requesting permission, and thought back to that first tremendous adventure; an adventure that had taken place little more than ten years before.

The *Star Seeker* had been built in space, about forty thousand kilometers above the Earth. It had been manned by a dozen adventurous people, captained by Crownwall, and had headed out on its ion drive until it was safely clear of the warping influence of planetary masses. Then, after several impatient days of careful study and calculation, the distorter drive had been activated, for the first time in Earth's history, and, for the twelve, the stars had winked out.

The men of Earth had decided that it should work in theory. They had built the drive—a small machine, as drives go—but they had never dared to try it, close to a planet. To do so, said their theory, would usually—seven point three four times out of 10—destroy the ship, and everything in space for thousands of miles around, in a ravaging burst of raw energy.

So the drive had been used for the first time without ever having been tested. And it had worked.

In less than a week's time, if time has any meaning under such circumstances, they had flickered back into normal space, in the vicinity of Alpha Centauri. They had quickly located a dozen planets, and one that looked enough like Earth to be its twin sister. They had headed for that planet confidently and unsuspectingly, using the ion drive.

Two weeks later, while they were still several planetary diameters from their destination, they had been shocked to find more than two score alien ships of space closing in on them—ships that were swifter and more maneuverable than their own. These ships had rapidly and competently englobed the *Star Seeker*, and had then tried to herd it away from the planet it had been heading toward.

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Although caught by surprise, the Earthmen had acted swiftly. Crownwall recalled the discussion—the council of war, they had called it—and their unanimous decision. Although far within the dangerous influence of a planetary mass, they had again activated the distorter drive, and they had beaten the odds. On the distorter drive, they had returned to Earth as swiftly as they had departed. Earth had immediately prepared for war against her unknown enemy.

“Your reaction was savage,” said Ggaran, his tentacles stiffening with shock at the memory. “You bloody-minded Earthlings must have been aware of the terrible danger.”

Ffallk rippled in agreement. “The action you took was too swift and too foolhardy to be believed. You knew that you could have destroyed not only yourself, but also all who live on that planet. You could also have wrecked the planet itself and the ships and those

of my own race who manned them. We had tried to contact you, but since you had not developed subspace radio, we were of course not successful. Our englobement was just a routine quarantine. With your total lack of information about us, what you did was more than the height of folly. It was madness.”

“Could we have done anything else that would have kept you from landing on Earth and taking us over?” asked Crownwall.

“Would that have been so bad?” said Ggaran. “We can't tolerate wild and warlike races running free and uncontrolled in the Galaxy. Once was enough for that.”

“But what about my question? Was there any other way for us to stay free?”

“Well, no. But you didn't have enough information to realize that when you acted so precipitously. As a matter of fact, we didn't expect to have much trouble, even after your surprising action. Of course, it took us a little time to react. We located your planet quickly enough, and confirmed that you were a new race. But by the time we could try to set up communications and send ambassadors, you had already organized a not inconsiderable defense. Your drones blew up our unmanned ships as fast as we could send them down to your planet. And by the time we had organized properly for war against you, it was obvious that we could not conquer you. We could only destroy you.”

“That old fool on Sunda, the Emperor, decided that we should blow you up, but by that time I had decided,” said His Effulgence, “that you might be useful to me—that is, that we might be useful to each other. I traveled halfway across the Galaxy to meet him, to convince him that it would be sufficient just to quarantine you. When we had used your radio system to teach a few of you the Universal Galactic tongue, and had managed to get what you call the 'planet-buster' down into the largest of your oceans, he figured we had done our job.

“With his usual lack of imagination, he felt sure that we were safe from you—after all, there was no way for you to get off the planet. Even if you could get down to the bottom of the ocean and tamper with the bomb, you would only succeed in setting it off, and that's what the Sunda had been in favor of in the first place.

“But I had different ideas. From what you had already done, I suspected it wouldn't be long before one of you amazing Earthlings would dream up some device or other, head out into space, and show up on our planet. So I've been waiting for you, and here you are.”

“It was the thinking of a genius,” murmured Ggaran.

“All right, then, genius, here I am,” said Crownwall. “So what's the pitch?”

“Ggaran, you explain it to the Earthling,” said His Effulgence.

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Ggaran bowed. “The crustaceans on Sunda—the lobsterlike creatures that rule the

Galaxy—are usurpers. They have no rights to their position of power. Our race is much older than theirs. We were alone when we found the Sundans—a primitive tribe, grubbing in the mud at the edge of their shallow seas, unable even to reason. In those days we were desperately lonely. We needed companionship among the stars, and we helped them develop to the point where, in their inferior way, they were able to reason, almost as well as we, The People, can. And then they cheated us of our rightful place.

“The Emperor at Sunda is one of them. They provide sixty-eight of the hundred Viceroys; we provide only seventeen. It is a preposterous and intolerable situation.

“For more than two million years we have waited for the opportunity for revenge. And now that you have entered space, that opportunity is at hand.”

“If you haven't been able to help yourselves for two million years,” asked Crownwall, “how does the sight of me give you so much gumption all of a sudden?”

Ggaran's tentacles writhed, and he slavered in fury, but the clashing of his teeth subsided instantly at a soothing wave from His Effulgence.

“War in space is almost an impossibility,” said the aged ruler. “We can destroy planets, of course, but with few exceptions, we cannot conquer them. I rule a total of seven races in my Sector. I rule them, but I don't let them intermingle. Each race settles on the planets that best suit it. Each of those planets is quite capable of defending itself from raids, or even large-scale assaults that would result in its capture and subjugation—just as your little Earth can defend itself.

“Naturally, each is vulnerable to economic blockade—trade provides a small but vital portion of the goods each planet uses. All that a world requires for a healthy and comfortable life cannot be provided from the resources of that single world alone, and that gives us a very considerable measure of control.

“And it is true that we can always exterminate any planet that refuses to obey the just and legal orders of its Viceroy. So we achieve a working balance in our Empire. We control it adequately, and we live in peace.

“The Sundans, for example, though they took the rule of the Empire that was rightfully ours away from us, through trickery, were unable to take over the Sectors we control. We are still powerful. And soon we will be all-powerful. In company with you Earthlings, that is.”

Crownwall nodded. “In other words, you think that we Earthmen can break up this two-million-year-old stalemate. You've got the idea that, with our help, you can conquer planets without the necessity of destroying them, and thereby take over number one spot from these Sunda friends of yours.”

“Don't call those damn lobsters friends,” growled Ggaran. He subsided at the Viceroy's gesture.

“Exactly,” said His Effulgence to Crownwall. “You broke our blockade without any

trouble. Our instruments didn't even wiggle when you landed here on my capital world. You can do the same on the worlds of the Sunda. Now, just tell us how you did it, and we're partners."

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Crownwall lifted one eyebrow quizzically, but remained silent. He didn't expect his facial gesture to be interpreted correctly, but he assumed that his silence would be. He was correct.

"Of course," His Effulgence said, "we will give you any assurances that your people may desire in order to feel safe, and we will guarantee them an equal share in the government of the Galaxy."

"Bunk," said Crownwall.

His Effulgence lifted a tentacle swiftly, before Ggaran, lunging angrily forward, could speak. "Then what do you want of us?"

"It seems to me that we need no wordy assurances from each other," said Crownwall, and he puffed a cigarette aglow. "We can arrange something a little more trustworthy, I believe. On your side, you have the power to destroy our only planet at any time. That is certainly adequate security for our own good behavior and sincerity.

"It is impossible for us of Earth to destroy all of your planets. As you have said, there are more planets that belong to you than there are human beings on Earth. But there is a way for us to be reasonably sure that you will behave yourselves. You will transfer to us, at once, a hundred of your planet-destroying bombs. That will be a sufficient supply to let us test some of them, to see that they are in good working order. Then, if you try any kind of double-cross, we will be able to use our own methods—which you cannot prevent—to send one of those bombs here to destroy this planet.

"And if you try to move anywhere else, by your clumsy distorter drive, we can follow you, and destroy any planet you choose to land on. You would not get away from us. We can track you without any difficulty.

"We wouldn't use the bombs lightly, to be sure, because of what would happen to Earth. And don't think that blowing up our planet would save you, because we naturally wouldn't keep the bombs on Earth. How does that sound to you?"

"Ridiculous," snorted Ggaran. "Impossible."

After several minutes of silent consideration, "It is an excellent plan," said His Effulgence. "It is worthy of the thinking of The People ourselves. You Earthlings will make very satisfactory allies. What you request will be provided without delay. Meanwhile, I see no reason why we cannot proceed with our discussions."

"Nor do I," consented Crownwall. "But your stooge here doesn't seem very happy about it all."

His Effulgence wiggled his tentacles. "I'm afraid that Ggaran had expected to take what you Earthlings have to offer without giving anything in return. I never had any such ideas. I have not underestimated you, you see."

"That's nice," said Crownwall graciously.

"And now," Ggaran put in, "I think it's time for you to tell us something about how you get across light-years of space in a few hours, without leaving any traces for us to detect." He raised a tentacle to still Crownwall's immediate exclamation of protest. "Oh, nothing that would give us a chance to duplicate it—just enough to *indicate* how we can make use of it, along with you—enough to allow us to *begin* to make intelligent plans to beat the claws off the Master Race."

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After due consideration, Crownwall nodded. "I don't see why not. Well, then, let me tell you that we don't travel in space at all. That's why I didn't show up on any of your long-range detection instruments. Instead, we travel in time. Surely any race that has progressed as far as your own must know, at least theoretically, that time travel is entirely possible. After all, we knew it, and we haven't been around nearly as long as you have."

"We know about it," said Ffallk, "but we've always considered it useless—and very dangerous—knowledge."

"So have we, up until the time you planted that bomb on us. Anyone who tried to work any changes in his own past would be almost certain to end up finding himself never having been born. So we don't do any meddling. What we have discovered is a way not only of moving back into the past, but also of making our own choice of spatial references while we do it, and of changing our spatial anchor at will.

"For example, to reach this planet, I went back far enough, using Earth as the spatial referent, to move with Earth a little more than a third of the way around this spiral nebula that is our Galaxy. Then I shifted my frame of reference to that of the group of galaxies of which ours is such a distinguished member.

"Then of course, as I continued to move in time, the whole Galaxy moved spatially with reference to my own position. At the proper instant I shifted again, to the reference frame of this Galaxy itself. Then I was stationary in the Galaxy, and as I continued time traveling, your own mighty sun moved toward me as the Galaxy revolved. I chose a point where there was a time intersection of your planet's position and my own. When you got there, I just changed to the reference plane of this planet I'm on now, and then came on back with it to the present. So here I am. It was a long way around to cover a net distance of 26 light-years, but it was really very simple.

"And there's no danger of meeting myself, or getting into any anachronistic situation. As you probably know, theory shows that these are excluded times for me, as is the future—

I can't stop in them.”

“Are you sure that you haven't given us a little too much information for your own safety?” asked Ffallk softly.

“Not at all. We were enormously lucky to have learned how to control spatial reference frames ourselves. I doubt if you could do it in another two million years.” Crownwall rose to his feet. “And now, Your Effulgence, I think it's about time I went back to my ship and drove it home to Earth to make my report, so we can pick up those bombs and start making arrangements.”

“Excellent,” said Ffallk. “I'd better escort you; my people don't like strangers much.”

“I'd noticed that,” Crownwall commented drily.

“Since this is a very important occasion, I think it best that we make this a Procession of Full Ceremony. It's a bother, but the proprieties have to be observed.”

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Ggaran stepped out into the broad corridor and whistled a shrill two-tone note, using both his speaking and his eating orifices. A cohort of troops, pikes at the ready and bows strapped to their backs, leaped forward and formed a double line leading from His Effulgence's sanctum to the main door. Down this lane, carried by twenty men, came a large sedan chair.

“Protocol takes a lot of time,” said His Effulgence somewhat sadly, “but it must be observed. At least, as Ambassador, you can ride with me in the sedan, instead of walking behind it, like Ggaran.”

“I'm glad of that,” said Crownwall. “Too bad Ggaran can't join us.” He climbed into the chair beside Ffallk. The bearers trotted along at seven or eight kilometers an hour, carrying their contraption with absolute smoothness. Blasts from horns preceded them as they went.

When they passed through the huge entrance doors of the palace and started down the ramp toward the street, Crownwall was astonished to see nobody on the previously crowded streets, and mentioned it to Ffallk.

“When the Viceroy of the Seventy Suns,” said the Viceroy of the Seventy Suns, “travels in state, no one but my own entourage is permitted to watch. And my guests, of course,” he added, bowing slightly to Crownwall.

“Of course,” agreed Crownwall, bowing back. “Kind of you, I'm sure. But what happens if somebody doesn't get the word, or doesn't hear your trumpeters, or something like that?”

Ggaran stepped forward, already panting slightly. “A man with knots in all of his ear stalks is in a very uncomfortable position,” he explained. “Wait. Let me show you. Let us just suppose that that runner over there”—he gestured toward a soldier with a tentacle

—“is a civilian who has been so unlucky as to remain on the street after His Effulgence's entourage arrived.” He turned to one of the bowmen who ran beside the sedan chair, now strung and at the ready. “Show him!” he ordered peremptorily.

In one swift movement the bowman notched an arrow, drew and fired. The arrow hissed briefly, and then sliced smoothly through the soldier's throat.

“You see,” said Ggaran complacently, “we have very little trouble with civilians who violate this particular tradition.”

His Effulgence beckoned to the bowman to approach. “Your results were satisfactory,” he said, “but your release was somewhat shaky. The next time you show such sloppy form, you will be given thirty lashes.”

He leaned back on the cushion and spoke again to Crownwall. “That's the trouble with these requirements of civilization. The men of my immediate guard must practice with such things as pikes and bows and arrows, which they seldom get an opportunity to use. It would never do for them to use modern weapons on occasions of ceremony, of course.”

“Of course,” said Crownwall, then added, “It's too bad that you can't provide them with live targets a little more often.” He stifled a shudder of distaste. “Tell me, Your Effulgence, does the Emperor's race—the Master Race—also enjoy the type of civilization you have just had demonstrated for me?”

“Oh, no. They are far too brutal, too morally degraded, to know anything of these finer points of etiquette and propriety. They are really an uncouth bunch. Why, do you know, I am certain that they would have had the bad taste to use an energy weapon to dispose of the victim in a case such as you just witnessed! They are really quite unfit to rule. They can scarcely be called civilized at all. But we will soon put a stop to all of that—your race and mine, of course.”

“I sincerely hope so,” said Crownwall.

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Refreshments were served to His Effulgence and to Crownwall during the trip, without interrupting the smooth progress of the sedan. The soldiers of the cohort, the bearers and Ggaran continued to run—without food, drink or, except for Ggaran, evidence of fatigue.

After several hours of travel, following Crownwall's directions, the procession arrived at the copse in which he had concealed his small transportation machine. The machine, for spatial mobility, was equipped with the heavy and grossly inefficient anti-gravity field generator developed by Kowalsky. It occupied ten times the space of the temporal translation and coordination selection systems combined, but it had the great advantage of being almost undetectable in use. It emitted no mass or radiation.

After elaborate and lengthy farewells, Crownwall climbed into his machine and fell

gently up until he was out of the atmosphere, before starting his enormous journey through time back to Earth. More quickly than it had taken him to reach his ship from the palace of His Effulgence, he was in the Council Chamber of the Confederation Government of Earth, making a full report on his trip to Vega.

When he had finished, the President sighed deeply. “Well,” he said, “we gave you full plenipotentiary powers, so I suppose we'll have to stand behind your agreements—especially in view of the fact that we'll undoubtedly be blown into atoms if we don't. But from what you say, I'd rather be in bed with a rattler than have a treaty with a Vegan. They sound ungodly murderous to me. There are too many holes in that protection plan of yours. It's only a question of time before they'll find some way around it, and then—poof—we'll all be dust.”

“Things may not be as bad as they seem,” answered Crownwall complacently. “After I got back a few million years, I'm afraid I got a little careless and let my ship dip down into Vega III's atmosphere for a while. I was back so far that the Vegans hadn't appeared yet. Now, I didn't land—or *deliberately* kill anything—but I'd be mighty surprised if we didn't find a change or two. Before I came in here, I asked Marshall to take the ship out and check on things. He should be back with his report before long. Why don't we wait and see what he has to say?”

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Marshall was excited when he was escorted into the Council Chamber. He bowed briefly to the President and began to speak rapidly.

“They're gone without trace—*all of them!*” he cried. “I went clear to Sunda and there's no sign of intelligent life anywhere! We're all alone now!”

“There, you see?” exclaimed Crownwall. “Our enemies are all gone!”

He looked around, glowing with victory, at the others at the table, then slowly quieted and sat down. He turned his head away from their accusing eyes.

“Alone,” he said, and unconsciously repeated Marshall's words: “We're all alone now.”

In silence, the others gathered their papers together and left the room, leaving Crownwall sitting at the table by himself. He shivered involuntarily, and then leaped to his feet to follow after them.

Loneliness, he found, was something that he couldn't face alone.

—L. J. STECHER, JR.