

THE

CORIANIS

DISASTER

Murray Leinster

When the *Corianis* vanished in space between Kholar and Maninea, she was missed at once, which was distinctly unusual. Jack Bedell was aboard her at the time, but his presence had nothing to do with it; it was pure chance. Ordinarily a ship is missed only when her follow-up papers, carried from her port of departure by another ship, arrive at her port of destination and say that she left at such-and-such a time, bound for the place where she didn't arrive. This can be a surprisingly long time later.

But in the case of the *Corianis*, there was no time lost. The Planetary President of Maninea had paid a state visit to Kholar for the beginning of negotiations for a trade-treaty between the two neighbor worlds. Now he headed back home on the *Corianis*, which was chartered for the trip. Important political figures of Kholar accompanied him to try to finish the trade-treaty job on Maninea. It was a charming picture of interplanetary political cordiality, and Jack Bedell got passage by accident. It was a short hop anyhow—barely six light-years—calling for two days in overdrive. Then, the day after the *Corianis'* departure, a political storm blew up in the Planetary Congress of Kholar, and a second ship was chartered to follow and give new and contradictory in-

structions to the Kholarian negotiators. So the second ship arrived less than two days after the *Corianis* should have touched ground. Only, the *Corianis* hadn't; it had vanished in space.

From any viewpoint, it was a nasty business. There was a limit to the distance at which ships could communicate in space, and there was a limit to the speed of radiation by which a distress signal could be sent; the combination was depressing. Call a light-second an inch: then six light years is thirty-six miles. In this frame of reference, a ship like the *Corianis*—a big one—is smaller than a virus particle; and if something happens to it on the two-day run, the job of finding it is strictly comparable to finding one lost virus-particle on several dozen miles of highway, with only a very few other motes able to move around and look for it.

It was an extra-nasty bit of business, too, because the Planetary President of Maninea was on board, accompanied by the Minister of State of Kholar; the Minister of Commerce of Kholar; the Speaker of the Planetary Senate of Maninea; the Chairman of the Lower House Committee on Extra-Planetary Affairs of Kholar; and a thronging assortment of assistants, aides, secretaries, wives, children, and servants. They were all settled down for the journey when Jack Bedell diffidently applied for passage. Somebody misunderstood, and thought him part of the two official parties; he got on board less than ten minutes before take-off.

He wasn't important; he was only a mathematical physicist. When the *Corianis* was realized to be missing, people worried about the more important people and felt badly about the women and children. Nobody was disturbed about Bedell, but the *Corianis* needed to be found and helped in her emergency. Nobody had ever yet located a ship once vanished in space, but the *Corianis* was remarkably well-found, with special devices for distress signals. She might be located.

Naturally, when she lifted off there was no faintest hint of disaster ahead. She was a huge ship and licensed for journeys of any length within the galaxy. On the Kholar City spaceport she towered twenty-five stories high, and was at least as much in diameter. She was an imposing spectacle as she waited for the clear-to-rise signal. When she rose, she was even more stately.

She lifted at 4:11 Kholar City time. In two minutes, the sky outside her ports was dark. In four minutes, stars appeared and automatic shutters cut off the burning light of the local sun. In twelve minutes, she was well out of atmosphere and merely a speck of dazzling sunlight reflected down to those who watched her departure. She was an artificial star, visible in daylight. She went on out and out and out for some tens of thousands of miles, then she swung slightly about some inner axis; she steadied.

She flicked instantaneously out of sight as her overdrive field sprang into being, and drove for the Maninean solar system at some hundreds of times the speed of light. By the nature of the structured field about her, the *Corianis* could not remain stationary. Wherever the field was, the fact of being there was intolerable. It acted as if it, and all its contents, were possessed of a negative inertia, so that enormous energy would be needed to hold it still. The theory of the overdrive field was not fully understood, but the best guess was that it partly neutralized those cosmic forces which tend to keep things as they are, and what they are, and where they are. Nobody knew just how delicate the balance of such forces might be, but the overdrive field worked.

Anyhow, the *Corianis* translated herself from one place to another with a celerity that was unthinkable. She did not so much move through space as exist for infinitesimal parts of a second in a series of places where she could not continue to exist. Yet she was safe enough. Since two things cannot be in the same place at the same time, the *Corianis* could not come to be in a place where

there was something else; she could not collide with a meteor, for example. If one existed at the spot where she should be a single one-millionth-of-a-second ahead—why —she skipped that space and existed temporarily where otherwise she would have been two one-millionths-of-a-second in the future. There were limits to the process, to be sure; it was doubtful as to how far a ship in overdrive could skip; it would not be wise to risk collision with a sun, or even a small planet. But such a thing had never been known to happen.

So the big ship seemed to float, utterly tranquil, in her bubble of modified space, while actually she changed her position with relation to the planet she'd left at the rate of some seven hundred fifty thousand million miles per hour. She was divided into dozens of compartments with separate air-systems and food-supplies for each, and she had two overdrive units—one a spare—and she was equipped with everything that could make for safety. If any ship should have made the journey from Kholar to Maninea without incident, that ship was the *Corianis*. It seemed that nothing less than a special intervention of cosmic ill-will could possibly do her any harm.

The cause of her disaster, however, was pure blind chance. It was as unreasonable as the presence of Jack Bedell among her passengers. He was a small man with a thoughtful expression and a diffident manner. To a few men working in extremely abstruse research, Bedell was a man to be regarded with respect. But he was almost painfully shy; to an average under-secretary he was unimpressive. He was on the *Corianis* because a man he'd gone to Kholar to consult had stepped in front of a speeding ground-car the day before his arrival in Kholar City, and there was no reason for him to stay there. The whole thing was accident.

The disaster to the *Corianis* was at least as unreasonable. Something of the sort had to happen some time or another, but it didn't have to be the *Corianis*— and it didn't have to be the particular mass of planetary debris it was.

For the first twenty-seven hours of her journey, the state of things aboardship was perfectly normal. The Planetary President of Maninea remained in his suite, except for a single formal appearance at dinner. The Minister of State of Kholar practiced equal dignity. The Kholarian Minister of Commerce relaxed—which meant that he strolled through the public rooms and looked over the girl secretaries with a lecherously parental air. Other political figures did other things, none of them outstanding. Nurses took children to the children's diversion-rooms, and some were obediently diverted, while others howled and had to be taken back to their mothers. Jack Bedell wandered about, watching his fellow-passengers with interest, but much too shy to make acquaintances.

The time for sleep arrived—the time by Kholar City meridian, which the passengers observed. It passed. The time for getting up arrived. It passed. The time for breakfast came around. It went by.

Bedell sat in a recreation-room, mildly watching his ship-companions, when the disaster took place. He was probably the only person in the passenger's part of the ship who noticed. The vanishing of the *Corianis* was not spectacular, to those who vanished with it.

The lights dimmed momentarily; there was the faintest possible jar. That was all.

III

From outside, something visible did occur. True, the *Corianis* could not be seen; where she was, she existed for such immeasurably small fractions of a microsecond that she wouldn't have been visible even in the light of a close-crowding sun. But there was no sun hereabouts; the sun Kholar was a fourth-magnitude star back along the ship's course, the sun of Maninea was a third-magnitude star ahead. Here was only starlight.

It was very faint and unable to make anything seem brighter than the tiny glitterings of the galaxy's uncount-

able distant suns. Even if somebody had been hereabouts in a ship out of overdrive, it is unlikely that any warning would have appeared. Now and again a tiny pin-point of light winked out and on again. It couldn't have been observed; there were too many stars, and too few of them blinked out for too-short instants. But there was something out here.

It was debris—a clump of lumps of stone and metal, hurtling to nowhere. They were the fragments of a planet, broken to bits and thrown away through space by the explosion of a nova, like the one that formed the Crab Nebula. The explosion happened before men, back on Earth, had learned to warm themselves by camp-fires. The gas-nebula part of the explosion was long-since expanded to nothingness, but the fragments of a world went on. There were scraps of stone the size of pebbles, and lumps of metal the size of mountains. Some floated alone, up to hundreds of miles from any other. But there was a loose mass of objects gathered together by then: small gravitational fields, which was of the size but not the solidity of a minor moon.

All these objects flew onward as they had since the galaxies were closer and almost new. The moon-sized mass of clumped objects crossed the path along which the *Corianis* translated itself. The ship was invisible, the planetary debris undetectable.

There was a sudden, monstrous flare of light. It blazed frenziedly where the largest clump of fragments floated. It was an explosion more savage than any atomic explosion; it volatilized a quantity of metal equal to half the *Corianis'* mass. It jolted the few hundreds of cubic miles of celestial trash which had

gathered into a clump. It made a flame of white-hot metal vapor ten miles in diameter, which in milliseconds expanded and dimmed, and in hundredths of a second had expanded so far that it did not even glow.

From a few thousand miles away, it would have looked like a fairly bright spark which went out immediately. From a few million, it would have seemed the temporary

shining of a rather faint star. At a distance the *Corianis* would cover in three heartbeats, a naked eye could not have seen it at all. It was merely some few thousands of tons of metal turned to vapor and expanding furiously. Presently it would constitute a cloud of iron-and-nickel atoms floating in space—which would be unusual; there are calcium clouds between the stars, and hydrogen clouds, but no iron-and-nickel ones. But this would be one.

The *Corianis* was gone.

rv

Bedell tensed a little where he sat in an easy chair in a lounge on board the *Corianis*. The lights had blinked; there was a barely noticeable jar. In a partly-filled dining-room just beyond him, people continued with what might be either breakfast or lunch, depending on when they got up. Those who sipped at drinks did not miss a drop. Jack Bedell gazed around him and automatically cocked an eye where speaker-units permitted warnings and information to be given to the entire ship at once. But nothing happened. Nothing. In a city, perhaps, one might not notice if the electricity flickered, or if the floor bumped slightly; but in a ship in space such things are matters of importance.

After a little, Bedell stood up and moved toward the door of that particular room. He glanced along the corridor outside. Yes. At the end there was a view-port, closed now because the ship was in overdrive and there was nothing to be seen. But such ports were very popular among ship passengers at landing-time; they offered the thrill of seeing a world from hundreds, then scores, and then tens of miles as the ship went down to its landing.

A stout woman got in his way, and Bedell diffidently moved aside. He went on to the end of the corridor. There was a manual control by which the shutters outside the port could be opened. He took the handle to open them.

Someone said hesitantly, "Is—is that allowed?"

Bedell turned. It was a girl, a fellow-passenger. He'd noticed her. With the instinct of one who is shy himself, he'd known that she suffered, like himself, the unreasonable but real agonies of self-consciousness. She flushed as he looked at her.

"I just thought it might be—forbidden," she half-stammered.

"It's quite all right," he said warmly. "I've done it before, on other ships."

She stood stock-still and he knew she wished herself away; he'd felt that way, too. So he turned the handle and the shutters drew aside. Then he forgot the girl completely for a moment; his hair tried to stand on end.

Because he saw the stars. In overdrive, one does not see the stars; in mid-journey, one does not go out of overdrive. But the stars were visible now—more, there was an irregular blackness which shut out

many of them. It moved very slowly with relation to the ship. It was an object floating in emptiness. It could be small and very near, or farther away and many times the size of the *Corianis*.

There was another object, jagged and irregular. There were others. The *Corianis* was out of overdrive and in very bad company, something like three light-years from port.

He swallowed, and then moved aside.

"There are the stars," he told the girl. He very carefully kept his voice steady. "They're all the colors there are. Notice?"

She looked; and the firmament as seen from space is worth looking at. "Oh-h-h!" she cried. She forgot to be shy. "And that blackness ..."

"It's the effect of the overdrive field," he said untruthfully.

She looked. She was carried away by the sight. Bedell figured she would probably find someone to tell about it, and if there was an emergency—and there was—the fewer passengers who knew about it, the better.

She asked eager questions, and then she turned and

looked at him and realized, that she had been talking; she was embarrassed.

"Look!" said Bedell uncomfortably. "I've done quite a lot of space-travel, but I—I find it hard to talk to people, though it's perfectly proper for fellow-passengers to talk. I'd be grateful.. ."

She hesitated; but his diffidence was real. He'd spoken because she would not tell anyone that the ship was out of overdrive. Maybe—maybe—something could be done about it. And people who are shy can often talk together because they understand.

"Then we'll find a place to sit down," he suggested.

Presently, inconspicuously, he wiped sweat off his forehead. The ship would be about halfway on its journey. If it made a signal, and if the signal could reach so far, it would reach the two nearest planets some three years from now, when the *Corianis* was forgotten. There were other resources, but they depended on the ship being missed right away. That wasn't likely.

So he talked to the girl. Her name was Kathy Sanders. She was secretary to an assistant to the Secretary of Commerce.

When they separated, he thought of something.

"Now, why the hell didn't I remember that a passenger ship has to have a spare overdrive unit?" he demanded of himself. "How silly can I get? Everything's all right. It must be!"

But it wasn't.

V

The *Corianis* lay dead in space. Dark objects floated about her; they were lumps, bits, masses,

mountain-sized things which millions of years before had been part of a planet.

There'd been only the skipper and the first officer and a quartermaster in the control-room when the disaster happened. Utterly without warning of any sort, the overdrive unit bucked and roaring arcs leaped and crackled;

the overdrive unit turned to scrap metal in less than seconds. The brownish, featureless haze outside the unshuttered ports vanished. There were myriads of stars—and objects. Something the size of a mountain-range turned slowly, off to one side of the ship. Innumerable other floating things hung suspended on every hand.

Save for the arcs—and they were momentary—there was no sound. There was a jar from the bucking of the Unit before it slumped into melted metal, but there was no flash of flame—no explosion of any sort. Yet the ship which had moved at the rate of three-quarters of a trillion miles per hour was still, and the first officer gaped stupidly out the ports, and the quartermaster began to shake visibly where he stood.

This was while the *Corianis* lay dead in space. But the skipper sprang across the control-room. He flipped on the ship's radars and swung the control which would warm up the planetary drive, normally used only for lifting from a space-port and for landing. The radars began to register. The *Corianis* was within miles of a floating rock-and-metal continent which existed in emptiness. She was within tens of miles of hundreds of bits of cosmic junk, ranging from the size of sand-grains to that of houses. Within hundreds of miles, there were thousands of floating dangers.

The "ready" light for planetary drive glowed green. The skipper jerked the lever to minimum power; the ship gathered way. He steered her clear of the nearest dangers. Below, the engine-room crew matter-of-factly cut away the wrecked drive-unit and began to braze the spare to functioning connection.

Time passed. The skipper, sweating, navigated the *Corianis* among the leisurely, rolling, gigantic things which could crush the ship's hull like an eggshell. It took him hours to get to where he dared use more than a quarter-gravity drive. It was more hours before he dared use half-gravity. Many hours passed before the radars promised safety if he went again into overdrive.

When the brown haze settled before the control-room

ports once more, the skipper was jumpy; the ship would be at least ten hours late to Maninea. The skipper let his third officer make the announcement over the public-address system. He couldn't do it himself; his throat clicked spasmodically shut when he tried to talk.

The *Corianis* should have been destroyed! She should have gone out of existence in a monstrous gout of flame; by this instant she should be no more than a cloud of vapor-fine particles, floating in emptiness. She had hit an enormous mass of planetary wreckage while speeding faster than light; she had hit a solid object she could not skip beyond. She had burned out her overdrive in what could only have been a collision! But it was not conceivable that the ship would remain as she was, solid and unstrained, after-a collision with a continent of metal out between the stars.

The skipper knew he couldn't be alive. He had a strange, numb conviction that he was a ghost, and the ship and all on board her with him. Despite this belief, however, he was cautious in his approach to Maninea. Ordinarily he'd have come out of overdrive for a corrective sight something over a minute short of estimated time of arrival; a thousand thousand million miles is leeway enough for anybody. But the skipper cut overdrive three hours short of arrival, and an hour, and twice more before he went on

interplanetary drive again and called down hoarsely for permission to land. The *Corianis* was more than thirteen hours late.

Even so, she didn't land immediately. Instead of getting clearance in forty-five seconds, it required more than an hour to get permission to descend. There was confusion aground; there was argument; there was acute apprehension and flat disbelief and the deepest of deep suspicion. When the *Corianis* did settle on the spaceport tarmac, there was hysteria.

Because the *Corianis*— at least a *Corianis*— was already aground. She had landed on Maninea just forty-seven hours thirteen minutes after lifting off from Kholar. She had brought home the Planetary President of Maninea,

the Speaker of the Senate of Maninea, and various persons dependent upon them. She had also brought the Minister of State for Kholar, the Minister of Commerce, the Chairman of the Lower House Committee on Extra-Planetary affairs, and a mass of aides, assistants, secretaries, wives, children, and servants. The ship itself was still aground at the spaceport.

When the *Corianis* landed—the Con'anw-with-a-burned-out-drive-unit—she settled down beside herself. There were two *Corianis*. There were two Planetary Presidents of Maninea. There were also two Speakers of the Senate, two Ministers of State for Kholar, two Ministers of Commerce, two Chairmen of the Lower House Committee, and two of very nearly everybody else who'd sailed from Kholar. And the twos, the twins, the sets, the pairs of individuals, were not merely as much alike as two peas are like each other. They were as much alike as a pea is to itself. They were exactly alike.

It was quite impossible. It was utterly impossible.

But it was even more embarrassing.

VI

Barely a day after the departure of the *Corianis* from Kholar, a hastily-chartered mail-ship lifted off to carry corrected instructions to the emissaries negotiating a trade-treaty on Maninea. This other ship went out some twenty thousand miles from the planet Kholar, winked into overdrive, stayed in overdrive with its position relative to Kholar changing at the rate of seven hundred fifty thousand million miles per hour, and arrived at the Maninean solar system on schedule and without incident. But the *Corianis* had not arrived before her. The *Corianis* was overdue. There had been a disaster; the *Corianis* was missing.

The shipping-service force on Maninea tore its collective hair. There was a ship aground, taking off for Ghalt. It carried away with it a plea from the shipping

service for ships to help hunt for the missing *Corianis*. The mail-ship sped back to Kholar; it carried a plea for aid in the urgently necessary search. Meanwhile, Man-inea would take all possible measures. Kholar would do the same.

The main reason for hope, about the *Corianis*, was that she carried on board the very latest distress-signal system for ships of her size and class. She carried a rocket which could drive some thousands of rfiles away from a disabled ship, and then detonate a fission-type atomic bomb. The rocket was of iron, which would be volatized by the explosion. It would be spread as a cloud of iron particles in space. In less than a week the innnitesimally thin cloud should spread to a million miles. In a month it would be a sizeable patch of vapor. It would be thinner than an ordinary hard vacuum, but it could be detected. In six months it would still be detectable, and it would cover an almost certainly observable

area of a spectrotelescope's field between Kholar and Maninea.

The point was that there are no iron-atom clouds in space. Should one appear it would have to be artificial and hence a distress-signal. In the case of the *Corianis*, her course was known; one could know along what line to look for an appeal for aid.

So, immediately, the shipping-service force on Maninea sent up a space lifeboat with a spectrotelescope on board. It would look for an iron cloud in space along the line to Kholar. The evidence for such a cloud would be the fact that it absorbed iron-spectrum frequencies from the starlight passing through it.

If the *Corianis* set off her signal-bomb a mere one hundred sixteen thousand thousand million miles from Maninea, the cloud could be detected within a week. If it were set off farther away, its detection would be delayed. But ships to search had been asked for; when they came, they'd follow the *Corianis'* course back toward Kholar, stopping to look for iron-clouds every few light-days along the way. They'd pick up an artificial cloud of iron vapor

long before light passing through it could get to either planet.

So the shipping-service forces hoped. The job of finding one space-ship on a sight-light-year course, with possible errors in all three dimensions—it wasn't an easy one. But if the shipping service did find the *Corianis*, it could feel proud.

But it didn't. It only found out where the *Corianis* had vanished.

VII

The *Corianis'* loudspeaker system bellowed, demanding attention. An agitated voice tried to explain to the passengers why they must remain on board for the time being. There was now in port—in fact right next to the *Corianis* — another ship of the same name and same design and same interior and exterior fitting. That other ship had brought passengers to Maninea who had claimed to be, and been believed to be, the persons the *Corianis* brought. Somebody who claimed to be the Planetary President had been on that other ship. Naturally, there was concern when a second claimant to that identity and office appeared. There'd been a Minister of State from Kholar on the other vessel. And a Speaker of the Senate, and a Chairman of a Lower House Committee and—in short—persons claiming to be nearly everybody down to the smallest child on board the ship.

The passengers on the *Corianis* erupted in indignation. Everybody knew *who* he was! It was ridiculous to ask him to stay on board while the identification of the other person claiming to be him was investigated! That other person was an impostor! He was a scoundrel! Clap him in jail and ...

Jack Bedell was possibly the only person on board the *Corianis* who really tried to make sense of the agitated words from the public-address system. The others seethed and growled and roared their resentment; he listened.

His expression changed from astonishment to in-

credulity, and then much later to a very great thoughtful-ness. Kathy watched his face as bewilderment and uneasiness increased in her.

"It's official!" he said presently, almost in awe. "And no politician would dare try to make anybody believe such a thing! It's panic—pure, unimaginative panic that makes them admit it!"

Kathy swallowed. "I can—imagine one person impersonating somebody else," she said uneasily. "But a lot of people—a shipload! And—the President of the planet? How could anybody impersonate him? Too many people know him too well!— Couldn't they be crazy to suspect us of being impostors?"

Bedell shook his head. "Delusions have a sort of cockeyed logic to them," he told her. "Nothing is as crazy as facts. I believe this. Reality can always outguess imagination!"

She stared at him.

"I've forgotten the figures," he added, "but the odds are billions to one against any person having the same fingerprints as any other member of the human race since time began. Of course, two in a generation is unthinkable. And here we've got scores of identical-fingerprint pairs of people turning up. The odds against it—oh, nobody will believe it!"

"But it can't be true, can it?" asked Kathy. She felt more comfortable, talking to Bedell, than she'd ever felt with anybody else. She hoped he felt the same way.

"Oh, it's probably true," said Bedell. "It's just impossible. That's always upsetting . . . Let's get some lunch and think about it."

They moved past corridors full of people who had been prepared to leave the ship and now were forbidden to do so. They were infuriated; they were insulted.

"Leaving aside the impossibility of the thing," observed Bedell as he and Kathy seated themselves in one of the ship's dining salons, "there are some other angles. There are two Planetary Presidents. Which is which? There are two Ministers of State for Kholar. The duplication runs

all down the line. I wonder if there's another me on board that other ship. I'd guess that the odds are less than for most people. And I wonder if there's another you."

Kathy started. She turned pale. "Nobody'd have reason to impersonate me!" she protested. But she was frightened. "Anyhow that—that couldn't be!"

Jack Bedell shrugged, but he smiled at her, reassuringly. They saw a waiter, but no one came to serve them. Presently other passengers came into the dining-room, talking indignantly of the affront of suspecting them of being fakes.

Strangers in uniform moved past the doorway of the dining-saloon. A pompous figure, the Minister of State, stood splendidly in their way. He addressed them as if they were voters, his voice rolling and sonorous and angry. He oratorically protested the outrage of doubting his identity. It would be resented! There would be retaliation! An apology was in order, and an immediate withdrawal of the order forbidding him to land . . .

The strangers walked around him and moved on. A bewildered man in ship's uniform led the way.

"They're going to the purser's office," said Bedell, nodding his head. "They'll take the passenger-list to compare with the other *Corianis'* list of people on board. Of course the local problem is that their president exists in two copies. That will upset the whole planetary government."

"You—seem to know what's going on," said Kathy, uneasily.

"I don't," Bedell told her. "But there's such a thing as a universe of discourse—an acceptance of the preposterous so you can arrive at sense. // it's true that there are doubles of almost everybody, alike even to fingerprints —why—such-and-such other things must be true, also. But not even in a universe of discourse would absolutely everybody on both ships be absolutely alike! There'd have to be some exceptions. . . . How long have you been the secretary of somebody who would naturally want you on this trade-treaty trip?"

She licked her lips. She was scared; the idea of another, independent version of herself, knowing everything she knew, capable of anything she could do, but not under her control...

"I've had my job three months," she said. "Before

that..."

"The chances are good that you're unique," said Bedell, "if the universe of discourse I'm thinking of is valid."

The men in strange uniforms went back past the dining salon door. They were followed by the Speaker of the Senate of Maninea. He expostulated furiously. The men in the strange uniforms looked hunted and upset. They still had the ship's purser with them.

"I think," said Bedell, "that this is going to go pretty far. How'd you like to look out a port at this lunatic world which says we can't be ourselves because somebody else is us?"

He led the way down two levels to where nobody crowded the corridors. It was quite silent, here. Someone had turned off the thread-thin whisper of music which prevented ghastly silence on the ship while in flight. They went to the end of a corridor. Bedell cranked open the shutters of a port and they looked out.

They were in the *Corianis*, but the *Corianis* rested solidly aground two hundred yards away. The other ship was gigantic; it was solid. It was an absolutely perfect duplicate of the *Corianis* from which they looked. It was not the kind of object one could imagine as partaking of the impossible or the unreal. There was nothing ghostly about it; it was defiantly an actual thing.

Bedell looked down at the spaceport's surface.

"There," he observed with careful calmness, "there's the purser—from this ship. And there's the other of him, over there. There are two of him, just as the loudspeakers said."

The men in strange uniforms had reached the spaceport tarmac with the *Corianis'* purser in their midst. They now met another group of uniformed men with the *Corianis'* purser in their midst. The port from which

Bedell and Kathy looked down was a good fifty feet high, but they could see perfectly. The purser just emerged from the ship was identical to the man already on the spaceport ground. They were identical in height and weight and the fit of their uniforms. That was conceivable. But they moved alike; they made the same gestures. It was insanely like seeing mirror-images making independent motions. One felt the same shocked incredulity.

Kathy pointed a shaking finger. "There's Mr. Brunn! My boss! But he's here on the ship! If—if

there's—if I'm down there too ..."

She searched for her own self among the figures down below, shaking with terror lest she might succeed.

A ground-car rolled out past the spaceport buildings and came to a halt below. Bedell recognized the man who stepped out; he was the Planetary President. With him was the Kholarian Minister of State. Both of them happened—as Bedell knew very well—also to be on board the *Corianis* which had recently landed.

"Now I wonder," said Bedell meditatively, "if the President who got here first is going to try to face down the President who got here second! And if the Minister of State of Kholar is going to denounce his other self, who's foaming at the mouth at this instant on board this ship!"

Another ground-car arrived and disgorged dignified persons. The intention was clear; the head of the Maninean planetary government found himself accused of imposture. Somebody else claimed to be him. Lesser officials who had seen the claimant were uncertain and unsure. But the President knew who he was! With enormous dignity he came to confound the impostor who could bewilder his subordinates. Face-to-face, he was sure, there could be no doubt of who was who!

But Jack Bedell, staring from overhead, saw the confusion and then the terrific and undignified row which followed the discovery that it was hopeless—not only to know who was who, but which was which. Other ground-cars arrived, and the two identical Planetary Presidents of Maninea faced each other. They were backed by equal-

ly identical Ministers of State of Kholar, two identical Speakers of the Maninean Senate, two Chairmen of the Lower House Committee, and so on down to the utterly identical nurses—identical to fingerprints and eye-patterns—who tended the utterly identical children of identical assistant undersecretaries, and even to the identical undersecretaries' identical wives. And even the wives were identical to the very number and location of gray hairs in their heads caused by identical griefs caused by their identical husbands! Naturally, there was tumult.

It was a beautiful row, a stupendous one, and it settled nothing whatever. The governmental process of an entire planet clanked to a halt pending the solution of the problem posed by the *Corianis'* tardy or over-hasty arrival. The government of another planet would be thrown into confusion as soon as this news reached it.

"I think," said Bedell, gazing down, "I think they're going to have to try something else. They'll never be able to settle the matter on objective evidence. They've just tried to act on the theory that two people can't be exactly alike—but it appears that they can be, and are. Now they'll try to find some people who aren't identical and study them to find out why not. I suspect that we may be called on, Kathy."

Kathy's teeth chattered.

"I—didn't see myself down there," she said shakily. "I—I don't want to! I'd—I think I'd hate her."

Bedell looked surprised. Then his expression changed.

"Yes. I suppose one would. Hmmm . . . Simple, natural instincts like that will probably have a good deal to do with settling this business."

As they turned away from the port, loudspeakers clicked and everywhere over the ship the same voice was heard in innumerable echoings of the same words: "*Will the following passengers please go to the exit-port? Will the following passengers please go to the exit-port?*" There followed four names. One was Bedell's. One was Kathy's. Neither of them recognized the other two.

"This is good," said Bedell. "They hope to learn some-

thing from us because we came on the *Corianis* and we are nevertheless like everybody else on every other planet in the galaxy. We're peculiar. We are ourselves alone. We can feel proud."

Presently, in one of the spaceport offices a harried Maninean official looked at them with great though precarious self-control.

"Look here!" he said uneasily. "On both ships together there are just seven people who don't match up to the last pimple with somebody else. You're two of the seven. Can you explain why you aren't part of the business that is driving everybody crazy?"

Bedell found himself hesitating. Then he cursed himself for self-consciousness. He said, "I got on the *Corianis* at the last minute—by accident. I wasn't really supposed to be on the ship. I imagine you'd say my presence is accidental. That might explain it."

The official said drearily, "The ship record says you're a mathematical physicist. Is there anybody on Maninea who might know you personally?"

"I think so," said Bedell. "There was a convention of astrophysicists on Hume, some years ago. I read a paper there. Some men from your astrophysical institute here will probably remember me."

"We'll check that," said the official. He seemed to brood. "This is the devil of a mess! The planetary vice-president has issued an executive order, keeping authority in his own hands until it's decided who is the real president. Both—both men who seem to be President have agreed to it, though both of them are raging. The two Ministers of State from Kholar have agreed to hold up official conferences until things are straightened out. And we're sending a ship to Kholar with a report and records and memos from everybody on both ships, to see if they can solve it on Kholar. You aren't anybody's double. But do you want to send any message? Nobody claims to be you—or her."

Bedell frowned. "I think," he said thoughtfully, "that there'll be somebody back on Kholar who'll claim to be

me. He'll be registered at the Grampion Hotel in Kholar City. He'll be waiting for a ship that will be coming here. He missed the *Corianis*. I'd like to write him a note."

"You wouldn't," said the Maninean official sardonically, "you wouldn't let sleeping doubles lie?"

"No," said Bedell. "I know him rather well. If he isn't there, it will be informative. If he answers, it will be more helpful still. And I think I can promise that he'll stay on Kholar. He won't come here. I wouldn't. I don't think he will."

"It's nice that somebody believes he can arrange something helpful!" said the official bitterly. "I don't see a chance! Do you realize that every pair of doubles we've tested so far has had the same blood type and same RH factor and same immunity-antibodies in his blood at the same intensities? And they also have the same fingerprints and same teeth and same height and weight and metabolic readings? I'm getting so I

talk to myself! If this keeps up I'll start answering back!"

"It could be worse," said Bedell, after consideration. "I don't think it likely, but there could be a third *Corianis*."

"Don't say it!" snapped the Maninean vehemently. "Don't say any more! I was relaxing, talking to a man from the *Corianis* that there's only one of! It felt good! Don't say any more!"

He turned to Kathy. "Young lady," he said. "I'd like you to talk to another girl from the other *Corianis*. She doesn't claim to be you, but she does claim to have the job of secretary to the same man. Will you see what you can find out about each other?"

"N-naturally," said Kathy.

The official pressed a button and said, "Ask her to come in, will you?"

He slumped back in his chair. Within seconds, a girl came in. She was nervous; she was jumpy. She looked relieved to see, in Kathy, somebody who didn't look in the least like herself.

"Miss Kossuth," said the official, "this is Miss Sanders. It seems that you've got something but not too much in common."

"Y-yes," said the girl from the first-arrived *Corianis*. "I'm Mr. Brunn's secretary. He's Assistant Undersecretary of Commerce."

"I'm Mr. Brunn's secretary, too," said Kathy. She moistened her lips. "Is his wife's name Amelie, and does he have three children—two boys and a girl?"

The girl from the first-arrived *Corianis* said uneasily, "Yes. This is crazy! Is your Mr. Brunn rather fat, and does he fiddle with his ear when he's dictating?"

"Yes!" said Kathy. She looked appalled. "Does your Mr. Brunn have a picture of a baseball team on his desk?"

"Yes!" said the other girl. "Alton High School. He played second base."

"So did my Mr. Brunn," said Kathy. Then she added, "I—I've seen you before. I—know you. I'm sure of it!" The first-arrived girl said helplessly, "I don't remember you. But at least we aren't doubles!"

Kathy swallowed. "But I remember you. You had the job I've got. You'd resigned to get married, three months ago, and you showed me about the work I was to do. You were going to marry a boy named Al Loomis. You said he was a draftsman."

The first girl went ashen-white. "I m-married him? I—I ... But I didn't! W-we had a quarrel and—broke up! . . . How did you know? I never saw you before! I never told you. . . How do you know all about my private affairs? How . . .

The other girl from the other *Corianis* began to cry. She ran out of the room.

There was silence. Kathy turned unhappily to Bedell. He said encouragingly, "That was fine, Kathy! It clears up several points. You did splendidly!"

The official stirred. He said without hope, "I'm glad somebody's pleased! If you've got a theory, don't tell me. Get it worked out and we'll have the Astrophysical In-

stitute boys look you over and then we'll have whoever should pass on what you think pass on it. I don't want to understand this business, because I don't want to believe it! But there's nobody claiming to be you, so far, so you can leave the *Corianis* if you choose to."

"No," said Bedell. "I think I'd better stay on the ship. This state of things should be unstable. I want to do some calculating from some books I have with me. . . . But I would like to talk to the Astrophysics people."

"You sound like you think you know what's happened," the official said. "It's all right with me if you stay aboard your ship. We're trying to keep the two sets of people apart, anyhow. Do you know what happens when duplicates see each other?"

"I can guess," said Bedell, "but I'd rather not. Come along, Kathy. Let's get back to the ship."

vin

The *Corianis* had vanished between Kholar and Mani-nea. After the fact was discovered, it took a mere few hours to get a space lifeboat out of atmosphere with a spectrotelescope on board to watch for the iron-atom cloud in emptiness which would be a plea for aid, and only two days and a few hours were needed to get the news back to Kholar. On the way back, the mail-ship which took the news may have passed within light-hours of the spot where the *Corianis* had collided with a celestial scrap-heap. But it was not equipped for search.

By the time the *Corianis* was four days overdue, a trampship took off from Maninea; it also was equipped with a spectrotelescope. It began, methodically, to make short hops in overdrive along the line the *Corianis* should have followed. Each time it came out of overdrive it made a search. It searched from three light-days from Maninea and six, and twelve, and so on. It did not really expect to pick up a distress-signal so early. An iron-atom cloud would be relatively small so soon after its presumed formation. But it would enlarge, and the fact that it would also thin out didn't matter.

That first hunting ship from Maninea reached Kholar. No news. It was joined by another ship which had come into port. The two ships spaced themselves some light-minutes apart and headed back for Maninea; they reached it without any discovery. Two other ships had arrived from other worlds in response to the shipping service's request. Four ships headed back for Kholar.

Empty space is dark. The firmament glitters with innumerable stars, of all the colors that light can be; but the total light is faint, and where there is no sun it is very, very lonely. Each of the ships making multi-billion-mile casts through emptiness seemed utterly solitary. A ship came out of overdrive to unstressed space. It located the sun Kholar. It focussed a spectrotelescope upon a five-degree square area of space with Kholar at its center. It turned on the scope. Only stars with strong absorption-lines in their spectra would appear in the scope-field. They were examined separately. If or when one of them showed the lines slightly widened, it would indicate that iron existed between the star and the ship. Then there must be a cloud of iron particles in space—a signal of distress.

A little more than halfway across, a ship from Ghalt—the last ship to join in the search—found the telltale widening of iron-spectrum lines in the light of Kholar itself. It aimed for the cloud and jumped for it. It overleaped. It went back. It found the cloud—and danger-signals clanged inside it. The iron-atom

cloud was then two and a half million miles in diameter. The ship sought its center; it found debris floating in space. It measured the iron-vapor cloud and computed its mass. There was too much vaporized metal to have come from a signal-rocket's substance; there was not enough to say that the *Corianis* itself had broken down to atoms.

The ship began to examine all the debris its radars picked up. It found some rocky and many metallic masses; some were the size of houses. There was a dense cloud of still larger metal lumps. Its parts were in motion,

as if it had only recently been jolted by something enormous.

The first ship was joined by a second, which also had found the iron-cloud. Later a third ship drove up and joined the search.

They did not find the *Corianis*. They did find a mountain-sized mass of metal, on one of whose flanks there was a circular, hollow, glistening scar, as if some incredible blast of heat had burned or boiled away the metal there. Rough estimate suggested that the amount of metal boiled away at this spot might account for the metal-cloud.

It did. An analysis of the cloud's substance disclosed nickel in considerable quantity with the iron. A measurement of the cloud's expansion gave the time of its beginning to expand—its creation.

The iron-cloud did not come from the *Corianis*' hull or signal-rocket. It was not iron alone; it was a nickel-iron cloud. It was metal vaporized from a mass of metallic debris. It had been vaporized at the time the *Corianis* had passed through this part of emptiness. Here, then, was where the *Corianis* had vanished.

But there was no trace of the ship itself, though one or another of the three ships examined every particle of solid stuff within thousands of miles.

The search-ships, though, had done a remarkable job; they'd located the scene of a disaster in space. The ship involved could not be found—but to pinpoint even the place where a ship had been wrecked was more than had ever been accomplished before.

IX

The confusion on Maninea already made for jumpiness. When a mail-ship came in from Kholar and called down for landing-permission, panic began. But this was not a third *Corianis*; it was an ordinary small mail-ship. It brought new and confidential instructions for the diplomatic party from Kholar.

The skipper of the mail-ship landed. He saw the *Corianis*, then he saw her duplicate. He did not believe his eyes. He had diplomatic mail for the Minister of State for Kholar. Shaking his head, he asked questions. He learned that there were two Ministers of State for Kholar hereabouts. He did not know to which he should deliver the diplomatic pouch. He tried to find out from lesser officials—from Kholar. There were two Ministers of Commerce. There were two Chairmen of the Lower House Committee on Extra-Planetary Affairs. There were two of everybody that had left Kholar. Everybody ...

He learned of the gibbering mix-up that defied all possibility and all reason. He saw the armed guards placed to keep the two ships isolated from each other. He heard of the freak discovery of a criminal in the *Corianis*' crew. In the ordinary course of events this man—an oiler—would never have been detected; he had only to stay aboardship and nobody would pay any attention to him. But everybody on

both *Corianis* had been fingerprinted. This murderer was identified by his fingerprints; the police wanted him badly.

But they didn't want two of them—which they had. He was taken from both ships and put in jail. The cells to which the two copies of one man were assigned happened to face each other. When a lawyer was appointed, he verified certain crucial items, and the crewmen in their cells howled with laughter.

Two men, obviously, could not be punished for a crime that only one had committed. So far as any conceivable test could determine, these two men were identical; they were the same man. But they could not both be punished; they could not even be kept in jail. They would have to be freed, because there was no way to assign guilt to one rather than the other; both were the criminal meriting punishment.

The upsetting fact was that they could now go out and commit any conceivable crime—and provided only one had committed it, and they contrived to mix them-

selves together so that one couldn't be picked out, the law could not touch them.

The mail-skipper went back to Kholar for instructions. He carried a painstaking account of the confusion on Maninea, and carefully-written documents by each person involved, claiming his identity and beseeching help to establish it past question. There was only one person whose letter was addressed to his own counterpart on Kholar; that was Jack Bedell. He wrote to a person of his own name in the Grampion Hotel; he was quite certain that he would receive informed and cheerful cooperation.

Two men from the Astrophysical Institute came to talk to Bedell on the *Corianis*. He was with Kathy when they arrived. The atmosphere in the ship was that of advanced neurosis, and Kathy could not bear the bright-eyed, indignant tension which led everybody to try to buttonhole everybody else and insist that they were who they had always been, and that their doubles were impostors and criminals. There is nothing more mortifying than to be uncertain who one is. And these people had faced other people who claimed their names and possessions and pasts, their personalities and their futures.

Kathy kept close to Bedell.

The talk with the astrophysicists, though, was technical to a degree that Kathy found impenetrable. The two spectacled men recognized Bedell. One of them remembered a conversation, on Hume three years before; they had no doubt of him. So they plunged into talk, and Kathy heard stray phrases. "*Obviously there could be no impact, but . . .*" "*The effect is of replication, of course.*"— That was the shorter astrophysicist's contribution. Bedell demurred. "*Replication,*" he said carefully, "*implies the idea of folding. I don't think it's that. I think we have multiple reality with true simultaneity in the different sequences.*"

Kathy could make nothing of it. She stopped listening, though relatively simple terms like "trans-chronal" and "alternative presents" and "tangential displacement" followed and sounded as if they might mean something.

She did notice with some surprise that presently they were talking absorbedly about the sacks of mail the two ships had brought with them.

The astrophysicists went away, still talking enthusiastically to each other. Bedell shrugged. "Maybe we'll work out something practical. They're going to try to get permission to read the mail."

"Why?" asked Kathy. She felt horribly stupid.

"We've agreed on a tentative hypothesis," he explained. "It seems that the mail, like the people, should be almost but not quite identical in the two ships. Some letters will be exactly alike, but some should differ a little."

This, also, did not register with Kathy.

"What's tangential displacement?" she asked. "I felt so stupid!"

"It's what they're going to look for in the letters," said Bedell. "If the postal authorities permit it, they'll send some of it to me."

The postal authorities did permit. A creditable reaction had begun among the persons on Maninea actually concerned with the problem the duplication of the *Corianis* had produced. At first, the sheer, stark impossibility of the facts made everybody's thinking chaotic. But the officials of the spaceport and the government developed a dogged, unhopeful, resolute point of view. This was no ordinary affair, but they would act as if it were. They would go through the motions of a normal investigation, using their brains as sanely as possible upon what had to be delusion. They were not sure that they would get anywhere; it did not seem that anybody could. But to act rationally about even a lunatic occurrence would be better than mere dithering or howling at the nearest of Maninea's two moons.

The head of the spaceport police interviewed the skipper of the *Corianis*— one *Corianis*. His answers made sense; if there hadn't been a second *Corianis* in port he'd have made an excellent impression. He seemed a truth-

ful and conscientious man. But then the same spaceport officer interviewed the second skipper.

"You graduated from the Merchant Space Academy on Ghalt?"

"Yes," said the skipper of the *Coran/s'-with-the-burned-out overdrive*.

"You were fourth officer on the *Ulysses*?"

"Yes."

"Third on the *Panurge* and second on the *Dhombula*?"

"Yes," said the skipper.

"You got your first command as recognition of your behavior in an emergency the *Dhombula* ran into on Astris IV?"

"No," said the skipper.

The spaceport officer looked at the record of the other talk. "It says here you did."

"I didn't," insisted the skipper. "I remember putting in to Astris IV while I was second on the *Dhombula*, but there wasn't any emergency."

The interviewer made a memo and observed, "You skippered the *Contessa*, the *Ellen Trent*, and the *Cas-siopia* before you took over the *Corianis*."

"No," said the skipper doggedly. "The *Cassiopeia* was my first command. I went from her to the *Corianis*."

The spaceport man chewed on his pencil. "This happens all the time!" he said distastefully. "The other skipper—the other you, you might say—did nearly everything you've done. But not quite! Each two people who are absolutely identical make nearly identical statements, but never completely identical ones. It can be checked whether you skippered the *Contessa* and the *Ellen Trent*! We can find out whether you're stating the facts. But when you're identical in every way but a part of your professional history, why do you differ on that? And even if we find out one of you is wrong—what then? You'll still be identical!"

The skipper looked at him numbly.

"Haven't you any idea, however unlikely, to explain the—this mess?" demanded the official.

"I don't know what's happened," said the skipper in a dull voice, "unless I'm dead and in hell."

The spaceport man could have asked, "Why dead?" He might have gotten a suggestive answer. But instead, he asked, "Why hell?"

The skipper said heavily, "I've got a wife and kids. He says they're his. I know they're mine. I've seen -him. I don't know how to prove he isn't me! But I know he's not!—Do you think I'm going to let him go back to my family, and my wife not able to know he isn't me, and my kids thinking he's their father? Will I let that happen?"

His hands clenched and unclenched. The spaceport official said very tiredly, "I give up, skipper.—Maybe you'll be interested to know that he said exactly what you just said, in nearly the same words and with apparently the same sincerity."

He waved a hand in dismissal, and then watched out the window of his office to make sure the skipper went back to his own ship and not the other. There'd been one deplorable incident. An aide to the Minister of Commerce had met his duplicate and his duplicate's wife while both were taking exercise between the two grounded ships, and there was very nearly a murder there and then. One of the two men had made the trip alone, his wife having sprained her ankle two days before the take-off. The other had brought his wife along. She'd tripped, but not quite sprained her ankle.

The man who'd come alone went into a murderous rage when he saw his wife with the other man. She was living with the other man on the other *Corianis*! Openly! She was his wife and the other man was himself. The man who'd traveled alone tried desperately to kill his duplicate—who as determinedly tried to destroy him. The wife screamed in horror because she could not tell which of the two was her husband.

But not all minor non-correspondences produced so much emotion as, in that case, the fact that one woman had sprained her ankle while her duplicate had not.

There was the mail. In some dozens of sacks from each *Corianis*, less than a score of letters were not twinned. In many cases the twin missives were exactly alike, down to the last and least and most unconsidered comma. In others, a word or an occasional phrase differed from one counterpart to the other. One personal letter, however, mentioned in one copy that a certain person had died, and in the other copy that he had made an unexpected recovery.

Kathy said desperately, "But it's all so—so impossible! Things like this ... I feel as if we'd all gone insane! We, and the people in the other ship, and the people on Maninea who believe in the people of the other ship— everybody!"

Bedell nodded. "Yes. It's like walking up to a big mirror, and suddenly you find that there isn't any glass there, and the people can walk out of the mirror—or maybe we've walked into it. We don't know."

"But it's—impossible!"

"Hmmm . . ." said Bedell. "There was a time when people thought you couldn't talk to anybody a mile away, and people couldn't fly, and nobody could travel faster than light. All these things are still impossible. You still can't do them. But you can do things that have the same consequences. We use those other things as substitutes for things that can't happen. In a way, this apparently impossible state of things may be a substitute for something that couldn't happen."

"Such," demanded Kathy, "such as what?"

"Such as the wrecking of the *Corianis*," he suggested. "Maybe all this has happened as the alternative to the *Corianis* exploded to vapor from some collision, with all of us floating around as gas-particles in space."

Kathy didn't believe it. Still Bedell acted more like a sane man than anybody else on the *Corianis*. The nervous strain inside the ship was nerve-racking.

X

When the two *Corianis* had been aground for two weeks, the situation took a very nasty turn. At first, the ordinary citizens of Maninea accepted the problem of the two ships as a sort of sporting event. They assumed that daring and clever crooks had planned a massive imposture, and that they'd been stymied by the appearance of the impersonatees. It seemed still more of a sporting event when the assumed frauds gallantly seemed to try to bluff it out; when they defied the police to unmask them. And when the police failed, the citizens of Maninea admired the impostors more than ever—but they were no longer certain which set of passengers were the frauds. So they waited for the scientists to make their tests and say, with confident certitude, that these persons were who they said they were, and those other persons were impostors.

But the scientists couldn't answer either. That was a shock. It was a disappointment. It was frightening. For example, the news-broadcasters found a man who'd been a schoolmate of the Planetary President when both of them were ten years old. He hadn't spoken to the President since. He would remember things that nobody but the President and himself could possibly know about. He could tell! The newscasters also found a grandmother who—at seven—had made mud pies with the now Speaker of the Senate. Nobody could fool her! The two unimportant persons spoke, respectively, to the two claimants to the Planetary President's identity, and to the two men who claimed to be Speaker of the Senate. They came from their interviews shaking and unable to decide. Both Planetary Presidents remembered everything from the age of ten. They reminded their pre-presidential playmates of things that the playmates had forgotten. The woman who'd made mud pies with the Speaker of the Senate was positive after she'd spoken to only one. He'd reminded her of the spanking she got for using the morning milk to manufacture mud-pie pan-

cakes. Only her old playmate knew about that! But the second copy of the Speaker of the Senate not

only remembered it too, but described to her the funeral of a defunct mouse and the decoration of its grave. So he was her former playmate, too.

During the ships' third week aground the citizens of Maninea reacted violently. It seemed as if they suddenly realized that the natural order of things was defied, that something sneakily suggestive of the supernatural was involved. When science could not reveal the mystery, the mystery might be beyond science. Rumors sprang up and flew about. Some were ominous; some were pure horror.

There was the rumor that devils out of hell had somehow escaped confinement and planned to move in among mankind and ultimately destroy it. Only a few people believed this.

There was the rumor that witches, by compact with the powers of evil, had become able to take forms other than their own. They would rule humanity; they would eventually enslave it. A larger number believed this.

The most popular of the rumors had a touch of scientific imagination in it. One *Corianis* and the beings on board it, said this rumor, had come from a remote and hidden world where there existed a race of monsters. They were non-human Things which could make even scientists believe them human. They could read human minds; they could take control of human bodies. They had come to Maninea to begin the extermination of humanity. And this rumor declared that the monsters could duplicate human bodies and that humans were being missed, about the space-port. Children had vanished; women had disappeared. The monsters who passed for men were anthropophagi. They devoured human flesh in orgies too horrible to be described, and then went out in the likeness of their victims to allure or seize on other

victims.

Very many people accepted this idea and felt a growling, rumbling hatred for the two ships which could not

be explained except by some such tale as this. And the fact that this story spread and spread brought denials. There were women who had sons and daughters in government service; they'd made the trip to Kholar and returned, but in duplicate. Some of these women fiercely demanded to see their children. They'd know their flesh and blood!

But they didn't. A woman who'd had one son found that she had two. And she could not have two, but she did. Then there were women whose husbands were aboard the *Corianis*. They protested that they would know them! And they came to weep horribly because they could not know which of two burning-eyed, frantic men had been their husband before he went to Kholar.

Enmity to the *Corianis'* passengers became a thing to shudder over. Almost any man would agree that, in all probability, one of the two sets of human beings was human; but one was not. It was something more horrible than death, and it must be destroyed. If it could not be decided which was human and which was not—then, regretfully but remorselessly, all must die ...

Kathy no longer made any attempt to mingle with the other passengers. She and Jack Bedell had been two retiring, diffident, self-conscious people who found talk with other people absurdly difficult. Now the confined shipload of diplomats and political appointees was so nerve-racked that Kathy felt aloof rather than retiring; she was defensive instead of shy. And Bedell's manner had taken on a tinge of authority. He'd started to work with the men of the Astrophysical Institute, testing materials from the two ships in extreme conditions to find out some basic difference. Very soon it was unwise for Bedell to try to go

from the spaceport to the Institute and back. Shortly after, it became even dangerous for the people at the Institute to come on board the ship. So they worked together with a vision-screen connection in being. As other approaches to the mystery proved hopeless, the research of which Bedell was the driving force came to be the only hope for a truly scientific solution. In self-defense

he had to adopt a manner pushing aside hysterical passengers who'd have taken up all his time.

Then there came a day when a delegation from the ship-passengers waited on him. The Planetary President of Maninea headed it; he was accompanied by the Minister of State of Kholar, the Chairman of the Lower House Committee, the Speaker of the Senate, the Minister of Commerce, and others. It was a stately delegation, though now and again muscles twitched in what should have been composed features.

"Mr. Bedell!" said the Planetary President. "The municipal authorities tell me that some scientists believe you know what has caused the monstrous state of affairs in which we find ourselves."

"Together with the Astrophysical Institute," said Bedell mildly, "I've offered some suggestions. We're trying to get experimental evidence for certain ideas. There are a number of things that seem to support the opinion we hold. But it isn't yet proved."

There was a pause. The Planetary President said firmly, "Suppose you tell us, Mr. Bedell! Decisive action must be taken, and soon! Where did that other ship and its company of impostors come from?"

"Where did we come from?" asked Bedell matter-of-factly.

"No hocus-pocus!" rasped the Minister of Commerce. "We're in no mood to be trifled with! Answer the question!"

"There's some resemblance between the two ship's companies," insisted Bedell, "so the question's relevant. We come from Kholar. But more certainly we come from ten days ago and the marriage of our parents. We come from the voyages of the early explorers of space. We come from events more surely than from places. I'm here because by accident I got passage on the *Corianis*. You are here from a longer but certain series of events. Do you understand? If you want to know where the other ship comes from, I have to name events rather than places!"

"This is nonsense!" fumed the Minister of Commerce.

"It's the fact..."

"Answer the question!" commanded the Planetary President, ominously. "Where did the impostors come from? How have they deceived the police? I warn you that there can be no more delay! These frauds must be unmasked, and at once ..."

"The evidence—what there is—" said Bedell angrily, "points to this ship as the abnormal, and you as the impostors! It's very probable that this is the ship which doesn't belong here!"

Anger bubbled over. These were practical men who'd been unable to do anything practical. They were half-mad with nerve-strain and frustration and bewilderment. Every man of them faced the possibility that an impostor might take his name and place and identity, and acquire with them his destiny and all his achievements. It was intolerable even to fear such a thing. These men wanted an answer that would give them something violent and satisfying to do.

"Damned nonsense!" raged the Minister of Commerce. "We know what we've got to do. Let's get it over with!"

And Bedell suddenly roared at them. He astonished himself. But he was no longer the mild and diffident and self-conscious person that previous events had made of him. Recent events had made it necessary for him to act in a new fashion.

"Idiots!" he roared. "Idiots! Your doubles on the other *Corianis* think the same way you do! Half an hour ago— not having a me to annoy beforehand—they tried to rush the police between these two ships, to get inside here and every man kill his own counterpart! The police gassed them down! That's what you'll try! And the police will gas you down! Try to reach that other ship to do murder! Try it!"

He glared at them and stamped from the room. Kathy followed him. Outside, he turned to glare at her because he thought she was one of the delegation. But he nodded when he recognized her.

"I had to shout at them*" he said morosely. "They aren't actually idiots. They're desperate. They're ready to kill to settle who they are, and who their families will welcome, and who their children will call father. Damn them! They've gotten so worked up that they're willing to commit suicide to get things back to normal! The men at the Astrophysical Institute have worked with me, and that's what has to be done. And there's no danger to it at all! But how can a man argue with men half-crazy with worry? Damn this business!"

XI

As a matter-of-fact precaution, the police of Maninea removed the signal-rockets from both *Corianis* during the forenoon of the next day. The signal-rockets carried fission bombs. The police also mounted guns that could be used if either *Corianis* took off without authority. The occupants of both ships visibly teetered on the edge of crackups. It was simple reason to disarm them as far as possible, after a mass attempt by the men of one ship to invade the other. The authorities of Maninea, withholding authority from the Planetary President because there were two of him, behaved with conspicuous sanity.

But sanity did not make matters easier for anybody. There were rumblings and mutterings everywhere. Science could not explain how duplicate ships and duplicate persons had come into being; so the man on the street either tried to think for himself—without much success—or else accepted the most dramatic explanation suggested by anybody else.

The most alarming suggestion was, of course, that protean, monstrous creatures from far-away worlds of horror, able to assume the forms of men, had come to Maninea to pass as humans and practise their grisly amusements with humans as victims and subjects.

An ill-advised humorist presented himself in a small city a hundred miles from the capital. As a practical joke, he pretended to have been a passenger on the *Corianis*.

To increase the effect of his jest, he was so unwise as to pretend an ill-concealed appetite for human flesh. To bring his practical joke to its peak, he put what appeared to be bloodstains on his linen where he could pretend to be unaware of them. He saw the horror and the terror he inspired. He was enormously amused. In fact, he was in a visiphone booth, hilariously telling a distant friend about the joke he'd played on the simple yokels, when he found them congregating about the booth.

He opened the door and, chortling, made terrifying noises.

They tore him to pieces.

A child was missed by its mother half a thousand miles from the spaceport. She screamed that the monsters from space had taken it. A mob formed and went surging here and there looking for somebody to kill. Fortunately, they found nobody.

A horror-broadcast impresario misguidedly took advantage of the public absorption in monsters. He produced a broadcast play dealing with the invasion of a planet by creatures which could take the forms of men, at will. The production simulated a newscast, but it was fiction. It was announced as such, and three times during its presentation the audience was reminded that it was make-believe. But the audience saw characters in the drama— of perfectly human aspect—let themselves relax and flow into horrible, shapeless slugs, which crawled over and devoured other members of the *dramatis personae*. It was not a good play, but its audience panicked because it had the form of a news broadcast. Citizens armed themselves desperately. They overwhelmed the police with demands for instruction and protection. Many sober-sided, civilized men fled with their families to the wilds.

And nobody seemed ashamed, afterwards. Two ships still rested at the spaceport. There were two duplicate sets of people. But this could not be, so one set could not be human. Therefore the other set ...

A sullenness came over the population of Maninea.

There was not one single person who'd arrived on the *Corianis*— either of her—who had not returned to the ship. A few had left the first-arrived *Corianis* before the second appeared. They came back and asked to come on board. People looked at them with ominous eyes. Everywhere they went, conversations stopped; small mobs tended to gather before their houses. They weren't safe away from the ship they'd come on.

They weren't safe there.

Raging, rumbling, aimless congregations of people seemed to roam the streets of the capital city. Hours passed and night fell and they did not disperse. There were many people who were literally afraid to go to their own homes. They felt safe only when among many others. Now and again men gathered around someone who talked in a low tone. Presently there were orators with sweating, earnest faces, shouting about the monsters at the spaceport. Some of the people there were human— maybe. But there were others who were aliens, who weren't human, who passed as human ... It was too bad if human people had to be killed to make sure that all the monsters died, but...

These things were reported to the two ships by the police. The police gathered strong forces at the spaceport. Jack Bedell worked feverishly, with a continuous vision-phone connection to the Astrophysical Institute. On a certain morning the Institute reported that identical metal plates from inside the two ships acted differently at blue-white temperature. One vanished on reaching an apparently critical heat.

Kathy took notes for Bedell, these days. She gathered that it proved that the situation of one of the two *Corianis* was inherently unstable. If it got the right kind of a nudge, it would shift to a stable condition. Kathy had no idea what a stable condition would be, but she was beginning to imagine a satisfactory state of things for herself.

Bedell depended on her. That stout and wistful Mr. Brunn, who was her official boss, took no interest in

anything but the liquids which enabled him to face fate and chance and destiny from a roseate haze. But Jack Bedell talked absorbedly to her in the rare moments when he was not working by remote control with the staff of the Astrophysical Institute.

On the second night after the delegation demanded an answer from him to prove the other ship's company impostors—three hours after dark—Bedell was restless.

"Everything seems stalled," he said irritably. "They're getting worried over at the Institute. They found a high-temperature difference in the hull-materials' reaction, but that's hardly a practical answer. And time's running out. There's contagious hysterical hatred of us building up. Something's got to happen!"

Kathy waited, watching his expression as he frowned.

"In one sense, our being here—and the other *Corianis* too—does nobody any harm. But they believe one set of us isn't human. They figure we can't be! They figure every duplicate may be—must be—something alien and horrible that's only pretending to be a man. So that hate."

"You and I—we aren't duplicates," said Kathy forlornly.

"We've duplicates back on Kholar," said Bedell. "By the way, I wrote to my duplicate to look your duplicate up. I told him he'll like you."

Kathy writhed internally. It was not pleasant to think of another self who knew all she knew and thought exactly as she did and could do anything she thought of. It was frightening, even six light-years away.

"I'm bothered about that hatred," said Bedell again. He paced jerkily up and down the room. "There've been mobs formed to storm the spaceport and kill us. The police headed them off. Trucks have been found loaded with explosives, hauled by men desperate enough to run them under the ships and set them off. But the police won't always be able to hold the mobs back. There'll come a time when they'll have to kill, to protect us. I doubt we're worth it."

"Couldn't we go somewhere else?" asked Kathy.

"Where? If they went off, we'd know where they went. We think alike. If we went off ... No."

Kathy said unhappily, "But you talk as if they were—real! You talk as if the people on the other ship were as real as the people on this! As if they weren't—monsters or impostors."

He checked in his pacing to stare at her in astonishment.

"Haven't you realized? Don't you remember looking out of a port between worlds and seeing the stars, and great black masses floating about. Didn't you realize what they meant at least when you saw the other *Corianis*?"

Kathy shook her head. It occurred to her that Bedell would always talk about ideas—even to her—when there were much more satisfying things to talk about. She suddenly had a forlorn little daydream in which Jack Bedell would look at her with shining, adoring eyes, and they'd be close together and neither one say a word for a long time.

But she heard phrases ". . . In overdrive a ship skips from one place where it can't stay to another place where it can't stay either . . . much faster than light . . . But it can't skip into a place where there's

something else ... a meteor . . . Then ..."

She looked at him dutifully and tried to understand.

". . . We ran into some debris that was rolling through space. We ran into a clump too big to be skipped. We couldn't skip beyond it, or to the right or left or up or down. But we had to skip! It wasn't possible for us to stay long enough to be destroyed by the collision! We had to skip somewhere. And we did!"

Kathy blinked. Her hands twisted, one inside the other.

"We skipped into another sequence of events. This sequence," said Bedell triumphantly—"I'm not talking about another place. It isn't places that count. It's events. We started out in a sequence in which I caught the *Corianis* and you had the job another girl gave up to get married.

We skipped to a sequence of events in which I hadn't caught the *Corianis* and you hadn't gotten the job. We made that skip when we ran into stuff in space."

The visiphone called. He swung to answer it. Kathy tried to figure out what he'd just said. Places didn't matter. Events did ... Suddenly she caught her breath, realizing.

"Hell's broken loose," said Bedell grimly. "The Institute just called. Mobs were roaming around the city, and there weren't enough police to keep them apart. They joined up. They're coming out here to kill us."

"But. . ."

"We'll have to take off," said Bedell vexedly. "And just when our experimental results were so good! But we have to take the chance ..."

He started for the door.

"Wh-what'll you do?" asked Kathy in alarm.

"Unfortunately I'm not a hero," said Bedell, "so I have to act like a scoundrel. Maybe I can persuade the skipper to commit suicide for all of us. That's the only chance we've got. But I don't really think it's very risky!"

XII

The control-room of the *Corianis* looked out upon the spaceport. It was night, but both of Maninea's moons floated overhead, and the other *Corianis* glittered in the pallid light. There were rows of cold-white sparks which were the lights at the spaceport's edges. Lights showed in the ports of the other ship. The skipper of the *Corianis* looked dully toward the sky-glow which was the reflection of the street-lamps of the capital city.

Bedell forced his way into the control-room. Kathy came close behind him. The skipper turned hopeless eyes toward them.

"I know!" said Bedell testily. "I know passengers aren't allowed in the control-room! But there's a mob headed out from the city. They've got explosives. They've got thermite. They've got sticks and stones and bombs,

and they're going to smash both ships and kill everybody in them—they think!"

The skipper said drearily: "They might as well."

"Don't be an idiot!" snapped Bedell. "You know I've been working with the Astrophysical Institute to get this thing straight! Our calculations are finished—just finished! I can tell you how to handle everything! Get set to lift off!"

The skipper said as slowly as before:

"The police are moving away. I saw 'em go. I was just thinking that with them gone I can lift the *Corianis* and smash that other ship. Maybe smash the *Corianis*, too, but at least that other skipper won't go to my family and have my children call him father."

Bedell growled, "He's planning exactly the same thing!" he snapped. "I'm the only factor-of-difference! Otherwise you'll think exactly alike! I'll call him! Where's the intership communicator?"

He found it. He called, impatiently. A suspicious, raging voice replied, it was the voice of the skipper, coming from the other space-craft. Bedell spoke crisply.

There was confusion by the control-room door. The Planetary President of Maninea pushed in. With him were other passengers.

"Captain!" said the President, with fine dignity. "There's a mob on the way here from the city. Either it has to be fought off by the police, costing lives, or this ship must take off to prevent senseless slaughter. As President of this planet, I order you to take off to space and go in orbit until this situation can be adjusted."

Bedell, talking into the intership phone, said harshly, "Yes. The President in this ship just gave the same order! Now listen! If we get out to space, and you destroy us there, there'll be no survivors from this ship. You want that! We want it the other way. But we both want this thing ended! We'll go up ten thousand miles and wait for you! Then we'll settle things!"

Kathy made an exclamation from where she gazed out a port of the control-room. There was a peculiar darkness

at the edge of the spaceport. The darkness flowed like water toward the two ships. The ground grew black where it spread.

It was people. It was a mob of humans, desperate beyond measure, frightened past mercy, swarming out to destroy the two ships which seemed to them the most horrible of dangers. There were few who had not heard the explanation Bedell had given Kathy only a little while since, but they had that hysterical terror of the abnormal which made their ancestors kill witches in the past ages. To them, the duplicate humans in the two ships seemed worse than witches. They were impossibilities—unless they were most malignant doom.

So the people of Maninea blackened the ground as they marched to destroy the spaceships. They blackened acres of ground, tens of acres. They were mad with fear and horror. They flowed on ...

Bedell used a voice he hadn't known he owned. He rasped at the skipper in a tone of utter, unquestionable authority, "Prepare for take-off!"

The skipper moved convulsively. But he had intended to, anyhow.

"Straight up!" snapped Bedell. "Up to ten thousand miles! The other ship will follow!"

The skipper pressed a button. The *Corianis* lifted. Jack Bedell could not let anyone else issue orders, or the impetus of his leadership would be lost.

"Full vertical thrust!" he rasped. "You —" He pointed to the Planetary President. "Watch the other ship! It's following. Watch it!" He pointed a finger at the Minister of State for Kholar. "You! Clear that mob away from the door! We want no interference!"

The ship rose and rose. The sky had not been bright. It became black, with specks of stars in it. The vast bulk of the planet underneath lost all its features. The ship rose toward the shining moons. The rim of the planet became visible because it blotted out half the galaxy. Up and up and up ...

The sun of Maninea came into view, and automatic shutters dimmed its blinding light.

"Watch for that other ship!" rasped Bedell. He had no authority, but he had a plan. The others knew only fury and despair. "Keep watching!"

The Planetary President said tensely "It's coming! It just rose into sunlight!"

"Off to one side!" snapped Bedell to the skipper. "Set up for overdrive! We're going to hit them from overdrive! There'll not be a particle of that ship left! Aim for it! Line it up! You'll not leave one man aboard it to take your place and your family and your destiny!"

The skipper's fingers fumbled. He leaned back.

"Into overdrive!" rasped Bedell. "Now!"

With a grimace of satisfied hatred, the skipper stabbed home the overdrive button.

The stars went out. Something arced horribly. There was the reek of burned insulation. The arcing ended. The stars came back.

The ship lay dead in space, with the dark mass of the night side of Maninea below and that planet's twin moons shining brightly above. The spare overdrive was burned out, now. But there was no other *Corianis*.

"Now," said Bedell in a wholly different tone, "now call down to the planet and ask for landing instructions."

There were babblings, but there was no other *Corianis*. Jack Bedell's orders had been followed, and the other ship was gone. In fact, Bedell was the only man in the control-room who had any clear ideas. The quartermaster made the call, somehow numbly. Because he was bereft of all opinions, he used the form all ships use when coming in from space, to ask for clearance for descent.

Now every man in the control room heard the astounded reply from below.

"Corianis? You're the Corianis? What the hell happened! You're written off as lost in space! Come on

down! Your coordinates are—Wait a minute!" They heard the voice calling excitedly, away from the micro-

phone at the spaceport down below. "*The Corianis is coming in! She's not lost! She's coming in! She's coming in!*"

There was dead silence in the control-room. And Bedell said in an explanatory tone, with something like diffidence, "He's surprised to hear from us. Naturally! This is our original time-track. In this sequence of events, we've been missing in space for almost three weeks. Our being in the other sequence was an unstable condition. We got into it because we ran into a mass of rock and metal out in emptiness. We couldn't skip ahead or aside, but we couldn't stay in contact with it long enough to be destroyed. So we skipped out of that sequence of events. When we hit the other *Corianis*, just now, it was the same thing in reverse. We didn't belong in that sequence of events. So when we couldn't skip past or to any side of it—why—we came back to our own universe."

He paused, and said painstakingly, "It's very much like the old nursery rhyme, really. '*There was a man in our town and he was wondrous wise. He jumped into a bramble bush, and scratched out both his eyes. And when he found his eyes were out, with all his might and main, he jumped into another bush, and scratched them in again.*' I'm explaining to you because they'll have some trouble believing us."

XIII

He was quite right. On Maninea they didn't know anything about recent events. Rather, the recent events they knew about were quite different ones from those the passengers on the *Corianis* remembered. They were a different sequence.

But things adjusted. The Planetary President resumed his office, with no competition. The Minister of State for Kholar had the shakes for several days, and then dignifiedly suggested that the trade-treaty under discussion be completed. It was. And the aides and assistants and secretaries, and the wives and nurses and children, were

all congratulated for their success in reaching port after their disaster in space.

But Jack Bedell didn't want any of it. Nor did Kathy. Bedell wanted to work out, at the Astrophysical Institute on Maninea, the mathematics and the new information derivable from his experience. He was offered living-quarters there, for his convenience. He conferred with Kathy. They went off for a honeymoon in the Leaning Hills district, and then settled down at the Institute for the time being.

There was only one professional consequence for Bedell from the *Corianis* disaster. The Planetary President invited Bedell and Kathy to the Presidential palace, and gave him a medal—which he passed on to Kathy to wear if she felt like it. And then, while they were having luncheon, the President said, "Hm. We crashed into the other *Corianis* at full overdrive speed. We bounced back into our own time-line—our own sequence of events. But what happened to the other ship?"

"Nothing," said Bedell. "We didn't hit it. We bounced to keep from hitting it. So they undoubtedly decided that we had run away. And that would be proof that we were the impostors. So the real you—and—everybody is received without question in the best human society again, and everybody's satisfied."

"I—see," said the President doubtfully.

But he didn't. Nor did anybody else. The Minister of Commerce had a bad case of nerves for some time after. So did others. And it is history that after the trade-treaty was concluded, it was a very white-faced group which boarded a space-ship to go back to Kholar, and it is history that none of them ever made another space-journey.

But everything seemed to work out all right. Once, to be sure, Kathy brought up a subject Bedell hadn't mentioned.

"There was another you on Kholar," she said uneasily, "and you said there was another me. And you wrote to the other you and suggested that—that he try to get

acquainted with the other me. ... Do you suppose he did?"

"Oh, I suppose so!" said Bedell abstractedly. "If I'd gotten a letter from him, saying something like that, I'd have looked up the girl."

Kathy grimaced. "What I'm pondering is—are they happy?"

"Why not?" asked Bedell in surprise. "Why shouldn't they be? They're the same as us, aren't they?" Then he said cautiously. "Mmmmm. We've been doing some computations at the Astrophysical Institute here, Kathy. We're pretty sure that what happened to the *Corianis* by accident can be accomplished on purpose. There are some of us who want to take a small ship and ram a minor asteroid hi overdrive and see what other sequence of events we can run into. We'll be able to get back, of course!"

Kathy drew a deep breath. She began to speak. She'd been a very shy person; she'd found it difficult to talk to anybody. But it was surprising how many things she found to say, without hesitation or delay or embarrassment, in telling her husband what she thought about that proposal.