





# FATAL ASSIGNMENT

IBY NAN GERDING

Ycnan sat shaking her head hopelessly. She presented a picture of complete dejection, shock, and helplessness. It had finally happened. She glanced once again at the ominous paper held tensely in her hand, a missile which was the ultimate culmination of a dread she had suffered for many months.

"By all the Gods of Mars," she muttered desperately. "My orders have come at last and apparently there is nothing I can do about it." Finally, heaving a sigh, she threw the offensive bit of paper on the table beside her, reached for an automatic cigarette, and settled back to consider her dilemma with what little calm she could muster at the moment.

Meanwhile, in an abode situated quite some distance away on the planet, Iarw sat at his desk, lost in a reverie. He contemplated something very pleasing to him, apparently, for he eventually broke into amused laughter. There was no mistaking the air of self satisfaction about him and, unable to contain himself any longer, he spoke aloud to the empty room, "Ycnan should have her assignment by now. I wonder just how she's taking it? If she's reacting in the manner I predict, then all my efforts have not been in vain. I've never worked so hard at anything before and if I am successful now, then I can be at peace."

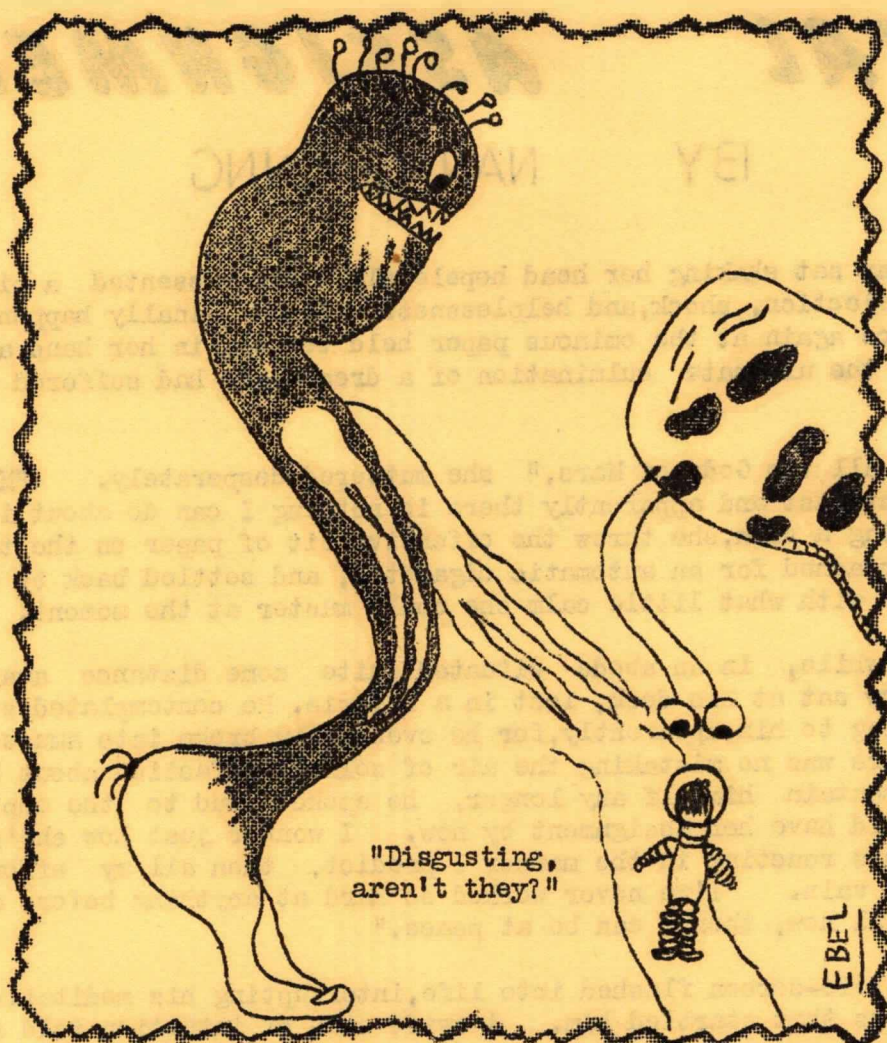
His tele-screen flashed into life, interrupting his meditations with an abruptness that startled him. A swift stab of intuition told him that it was Ycnan, and a pleasant glow of anticipation suffused his features. Flicking the receiver and the audio buttons, he waited for the image to focus. As he had surmised, Ycnan's visage appeared and an extremely unhappy countenance it was too. Assuming an expression of surprise, Iarw spoke:

"Yes, Ycnan? What on Venus is wrong?"

"What's wrong?" she sputtered angrily. "You double - dyed - in - the-wool aristocrat! You've ruined my life, destroyed my happiness and the peace of mind I once had, and it's all your fault. You and your smooth and persuasive ways! I always was a sucker for a line and I swallowed yours - hook and sinker. You know perfectly well what's wrong. Thanks to your diabolical planning, I'm being forced to carry out the orders of his Orderly-Eminence, your chief. Oh, I wish there was some way to get even with you!" She paused a moment, while a look of fiendish glee crossed her face. "She gritted her teeth spitefully, "There is one way I can do it. I'll simply refuse to follow orders, for by Pluto, no one can make me do this! I may be blackballed in the process, but you'll be blackballed right along with me! What do you think of that, you backstabber?"

Ycnan noticed a faint twinge of alarm pluck at Iarw. Obviously he was trying to hide his feelings, as he protested, "I don't believe you would do that, Ycnan. You aren't that much of a coward. Great Ghu, woman,





it's merely a routine assignment--well, maybe not exactly routine, but it's not too much outa line with what you've been doing for the past couple of years. Stop your spluttering for a minute, and do a little thinking for a change. You act as if I had committed you to life imprisonment or-----"

"I don't care," Ycnan interrupted vehemently. "It's just as bad. Right now I wonder why in nine planets I ever listened to you. Oh, skip it. You wouldn't understand anyhow." She cut the connection thus forestalling anything further Iarw might add to her mental torture.

Back in her home, Ycnan turned away from her tele-screen, threw herself in a chair and beat frantically at the arms with her fists. Then she held her aching head in her hands and moaned, "Think, think, think! The more I think, the blanker my mind becomes. I have never been faced with anything in my life that I was more convinced I couldn't do. The assignment is an impossibility, especially for one of my nature. Six of them I have to capture---six and even one is hard enough to trap. Oh mine Gott, what next?"

Impetuously she sprang to her feet and began pacing the floor. "Some say that when your mind refuses to function, to start rhyming, that rhyme will serve as a mind-cleansor, sweep out the mental cobwebs, so to speak. I'm certainly going to have to do a lot of mental house-cleaning if I ever

fulfill this mission. At this moment, I think I would try almost anything." With an intensity born of desperation, she muttered in time with her steps:

"Cro-magnon overswept Neanderthal,  
When race-migration once began,  
And north barbarians held in thrall  
The Romans in their counterplan."

"Well, isn't that just tooooo bad! Big help that was." She stopped before the bookshelves lining the walls of the room. "Where is that dictionary? Oh, here it is." Reaching up she pulled out a dark green volume and began thumbing through the pages. "I need a word to rhyme about. Ahhhh, here." Resuming a monotonous pace, she continued:

"I looked upon page eighty-three  
To see what fate had picked for me,  
What noun was there to rhyme about?  
I looked....then loosed a gleeful shout.

"Of all the words therein contained,  
This little noun was fore-ordained  
To plague my every waking hour,  
With subtle dreams that oft went sour.

"It had nine letters so combined,  
They spell out what is in my mind,  
I try to fill their prophecy,  
Though all I feel is enmity.

"This noun belies what I aspire,  
But it contains my fond desire.  
These letters spell with no finesse  
That little word of....AUTHORESS!"

"Oh, brother," she wailed, "that's enough to make anyone feel worse. Where in tunket did I leave my purse? I'm going out-----to get drunk no doubt. And maybe they'll haul me away in a hearse." Angrily, she grabbed her things and stalked out of the house still rhyming:

"Without any delay,  
I'll be forced to say,  
I fully intend to flaunt you.  
For I liked your ode,  
Called The Briscoll Road,  
And for that I'm going to haunt you.

"With a composition,  
A veritable rendition,  
Of my philosophy.  
I think life illusion,  
Delusion, confusion,  
And death the reality.

"So I'm forced to agree,  
In spite of your plea,  
With the sentiments expressed (cont'd)



To whom it may concern-ye Ed's address-Box 484, Roseville, Illinois, U.S.A.

In your little ode,  
Called The Briscoll Road,  
And it leaves me quite depressed  
"To think I'd warily,  
Or voluntarily,  
With anyone agree.  
Though life may be dull,  
I might as well cull,  
The joy of contrariety!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Two weeks and umpteen headaches later, Ycnan was well on her way to a complete nervous breakdown. The gal who thought she did not have any nerves, who believed she could take anything with equal immutability was learning a few things about herself. This had her stumped. Outwardly, her friends didn't notice much difference in her. She continued her daily routine much the same as before..not displaying any of the inner turmoil that was making every waking and sleeping hour a hell. Yes, she was even experiencing nightmares about her assignment now.

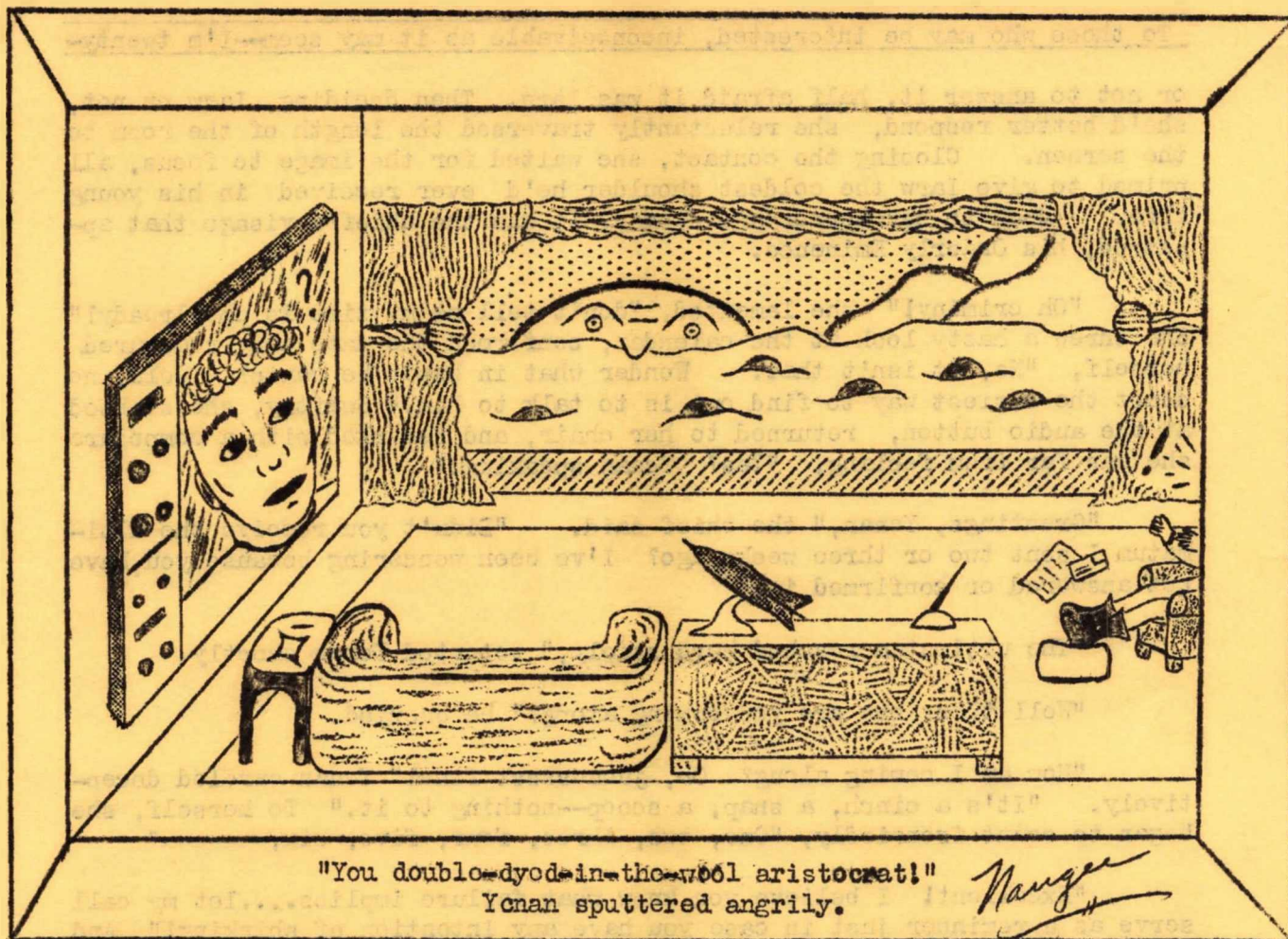
True, the fact that she hadn't contacted Iarw either by tele-screen or by letter was causing some comment. Iarw, whom she had once considered one of her best friends, now held a rather dubious position in her mind. Also, her gremlins were suffering somewhat from lack of attention. In this day and age, keeping gremlins was out of style. In the twentieth century, it was still quite a fad, but even then it had begun to lose its popularity. However, Ycnan usually did what she liked regardless of other's opinions--and she liked gremlins. Though gremlins could be unduly mischievous and troublesome, she thought they were rather cute and even heartwarming on occasion. Here she was, not only neglecting the three she had, but was planning on acquiring more around the first of the year. Yes, matters were rapidly approaching a critical point and the tension was becoming unbearable.

The fatal moment was coming closer and closer and as yet she had made no progress. Others on this planet had faced the same ordeal and come through with flying colors. Six dogs, cats, or gremlins even, she might possibly be able to produce but those things were a horse of a different color. Six of them she had to capture and black and white at that. Or, if not black and white, they at least had to be a species with coloring. She wished fervently that she had a chance to talk to at least one person who had been through the same fire.....and emerged unscathed. It wasn't the opportunity she lacked but the time factor involved that was scaling her doom. She would have to attempt it alone. Turmoil and chaos seethed unmercifully through her being.

Today was Sunday, rather warm, but gloomy and gray and it fitted Ycnan like a glove, considering the mood that held her in its grip. She was sitting gazing out the window, not seeing much of anything, but thinking fast and furiously.

"Oh, Lord," she breathed, "what am I going to do? The hunter instead of the hunted is trapped, enmeshed in a set of evil circumstances





from which there is no escape. I know I lack decision and a certain type of fortitude but one thing is intolerable. I hate to have my friends find it out, even if they do claim they are foolish, stupid and ineffectual. I've been racking my brains for four weeks over this unearthly predicament until I wonder that I have any of them left to rack. I'm still tempted to ignore the situation entirely and let it go at that." She turned to glance at her desk and the notes pertaining to the threatening dilemma spread out there in riotous confusion.

That glance finally settled the issue in question. "By Mars, here is something I've started and I'll finish it, no matter what the cost."

With new determination, she rose and started pacing the floor. "Not one, not two, not three, but six of those multi-colored creatures I have to run down," she muttered. "They sure pile it on. And I suppose larv thinks I'm doing just what I threatened to do-----nothing. Well, let him think so. He got me into this and he can just squirm for a while. Of course, I haven't accomplished my goal yet either, and though I have a rather vague plan of action mapped out, I sure have a long way to go too. And when or if I do manage to impress six of those horrible things, what in tunket will I have to show for it after I turn them in?" She shook her head doubtfully. "I'd hate to try to answer that right at this stage in the game." She sank wearily into her chair by the desk.

She was still sitting there two hours later when the tele-screen across the room flashed its signal. She sat for a moment debating whether



To those who may be interested, inconceivable as it may seem—I'm twenty-

or not to answer it, half afraid it was Iarw. Then deciding, Iarw or not, she'd better respond, she reluctantly traversed the length of the room to the screen. Closing the contact, she waited for the image to focus, all primed to give Iarw the coldest shoulder he'd ever received in his young life. Much to her horror and dismay, it was the chief's visage that appeared, his Orderly Eminence.

"Oh criminy!" she lamented, "don't tell me my time is up already?" She threw a hasty look at the calendar, confirmed the date and reassured herself, "No, it isn't that. Wonder what in kaput he wants? Well, no doubt the easiest way to find out is to talk to him." Swiftly, she stabbed at the audio button, returned to her chair, and remarked with a composure she was far from feeling, "Yes? Ycnan speaking."

"Greetings, Ycnan," the chief said. "Didn't you receive the ultimatum I sent two or three weeks ago? I've been wondering because you have not answered or confirmed it."

"The ultimatum reached here safely," retorted Ycnan shortly.

"Well then, how are you coming along?" he queried.

"How am I coming along? Oh, juuuusssst fine!" Ycnan caroled deceptively. "It's a cinch, a snap, a scoop--nothing to it." To herself, she began to count frenziedly, "One, two, three, four, five, six,-----"

"Excellent! I believe you know what failure implies....let my call serve as a reminder just in case you have any intention of shirking!" And with that cryptic statement, his Orderly Eminence broke contact.

"-----eighteen, nineteen, twenty," Ycnan was still counting desperately to herself, hoping vainly to hold her temper and restore a little confidence to herself. "Cripes, what a liar I am! Now all I need to make things just perfect is a letter or a call from Iarw, wanting to know how I'm doing and comforting me with words of how really simple the whole assignment is if I just apply myself. Then I will go completely nuts." She returned to her desk, deliberating on ways and means.

"I could cheat," she whispered consolingly to herself. "But I don't like the idea very well. In fact, I don't like the idea at all. If there is anything I despise, it's a cheat. There are ways to avoid the worst of the assignment—I could trap all plain white things—they're much easier to handle. But I'll doom myself to failure before I'll resort to such measures." She shook her head as if to clear it and continued speculatively, "My plan for procedure that I have diagrammed here ~~will~~ just have to do. Now all that is left is to go out and follow it, step by step. My time is awfully short now and I only hope that I encounter no pitfalls."

With that momentous statement, she resigned herself to her fate and went to work with a will. Finally, in the wee hours of a gray, stormy and quite gloomy morning, she completed the project. Worn out, discouraged, and quite disgusted with the whole mess, she crated the six things, and sent them winging on their way to the designated rendezvous. With a sigh of unresisting acquiescence, if not relief, she removed all traces of her recent flurried activity and collapsed limply into her favorite chair ----- the only one at the moment that wasn't occupied by dogs, cats, or gremlins.



nine, married, have three children (and a), been a fan for two long years..

With a cup of coffee and a cigarette, she relaxed for the first time in many days and reviewed what she had completed with such effort. Presently she began to smile, and then to chuckle, and finally she burst into hysterical laughter.

Almost choking in her glee, she gasped aloud, "This is good but really good! What I've done to them shouldn't happen to a Martian kreet! I believe I've accomplished more in my bumbling, stumbling way than if I'd just sat back and ignored the assignment. Sure I would have been an out-cast and Iarw too. But this way, his Orderly Eminence, Iarw, and all concerned will have a headache, not to mention indigestion and perhaps worse, for a good six months after the results are released." She chuckled with fiendish malice. "Serves them right, though of them all, I suppose Iarw is the one that most deserves such a doom."

Without warning that last thought gave her a precipitate chill. Her recent elation evaporated like a puff of smoke leaving her stone sober and frighteningly empty of all feeling.

"But what of the rest of them?" she wondered wildly. "If I am perfectly honest, I'll have to admit that they're no more than innocent bystanders and, as such, they certainly don't deserve being drawn into such a web of intrigue. Great Holocaust, what have I done?"

And then the joy of her revenge turned to bitter ashes. In its stead reigned the icy blackness of remorse. "It's a terrible thing to inflict such ruin on the many for the sake of getting even with one," she uttered convulsively. And poor Ycnan, after days of suffering and mental strain, broke down completely. If she had been Iarw, she probably would have grabbed a book of poetry and read it from cover to cover, but being Ycnan, she immediately joined ten more space clubs, eleven more committees, and read four obsolete AMAZING'S from start to finish. Poor girl--she had lost her perspective entirely and from now on would be considered a hopeless case.

\* \* \* \* \*

Time moved on. As is always the case, it moved fast or slow depending on the individual viewpoint. In this instance, time moved slowly, ponderously, inexorably. However, it wasn't much more than a week later when the result of Ycnan's long tedious toiling reached its prescribed destination. That destination was the abode of his Orderly Eminence, The Receiver of All, The Sender of All.

On being notified that Ycnan's assignment had come through at last, his Orderly Eminence hurriedly retired to his checking room. Here in this checking room, success or failure, acceptance or rejection, life or death of individuals was decided. Though an exalted personage in some sense of the word, his Orderly Eminence was still only human and could make mistakes. And he had made a mistake. He had been deluded into thinking that great things were to be expected of Ycnan. In other words, he had been misled by well-meaning, but misinformed, people.

And then he made another mistake.



I suppose you could say I broke the ice this time. Next time I'll fall in.

He started to dissect Ycnan's work.

He picked up the six things - gingerly.

He looked at them.

He studied them.

He examined them minutely.

He scanned and scrutinized them.

He couldn't believe the evidence before his eyes! His normally healthy appearing complexion turned red, then purple, and finally back to chalk white. He felt an inner churning that he knew would mount to an unbearable pressure and torture. He laid his head on his arms, moaning, and finally in actual fright, he stuttered, "Great Venusian toads! It's impossible. It can't be! And I was the one that gave the assignment. I certainly didn't expect Ycnan to go to such great lengths. I didn't know the assignment would unbalance her. And I have to let the rest of the tribunal see these things!"

His Orderly Eminence, Flash Ebony, continued to writhe and twist with the horror of it. With an immense effort and mustering of his forces, he looked up and again stuttered, "W-w-what s-some p-people won't do to f-fill an assignment. I wonder what in nine planets Iarw was thinking of to enlist this--this--p-person?"

And with that he unwillingly and slowly and almost tearfully added Ycnan's contribution to the rest, wondering, meanwhile, if and how Saps would or could ever survive such a calamity.....

THE wonderful, gratifying, blessed, and relieving END

#####

#### FOOT--NOTES

I wish this footnote could be half as spine(or should I say 'rib'?) tickling as Wrai Ballard's footnote which appeared in his last OUTSIDERS. Maybe I should say toe-tickling. In any case, if poor Bill laughed as hard--nay, rolled with mirth--as I did, while he was helping Wrai, then it is a miracle to me that he ever recovered. That sentence doesn't make much sense. Bill helped Wrai, I didn't--I just gazed upon the results. Chuckle. Anyhow, I can't leave this space empty so my footnotes will deal mostly with technical detail. I reckon that's what you call it or them or something.

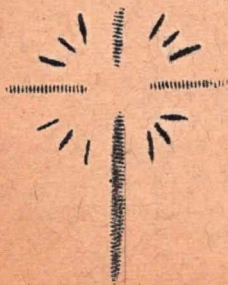
The cover and the back of this zine are Masterweave Mimeograph paper and all that in between is Mastergraph Mimeo Bond. The cover is lime-green and the back is granite-white. Just for the records, the cover isn't Masterweave--I donno what it is. I use Royal Blue Stencils, Master Duplicating Ink, an electric AB Dick Mimeo, and a home-made mimeoscope. There is 74 elite type to a line and sixty lines to a page(approximately). My typer is an L.C. Smith and I'm out of space, thank the Martian Gods!

*Margee*





A MERRY CHRISTMAS to ALL



*Yangan*  
H. 52



