

# PLANET STORIES



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# THE BRIDES OF OOL

By M. A. CUMMINGS

*The Goddess of Love had never showered Ool with her favors. He was the saddest lover this side of lo . . . either that, or the most skillful lady killer since the invention of Gilk's death-ray.*

AS THE soft tones of the morning gong sounded through the cabin Ool yawned and stretched. Then he grinned, remembering. This was the first morning of his honeymoon. Of course, honeymoons were even more out-of-date than marriage services. But Loris had wanted both and Ool was willing to let her have her way.

Funny to think that after all this time Loris was really his. His hand caressed the form lying beside him, the flesh smooth and cold as marble.

Cold! He sat up suddenly, staring at the girl. The pearly lustre of her skin had faded to a chalky white, and he could see no sign of breathing. Frantically he felt for a heartbeat. There was none. Loris—his beautiful Loris, was dead.

As the lights glowed on the board, the young Watcher forgot discipline, even forgot the inter-office video. Stumbling into the captain's office, he shouted,

"It's Commander Ool. He's requesting permission to land—" he gulped, came to attention, "sir."

The captain was equally startled. But years of training helped him to keep control.

"Wonder where he's been all this time. No report from him in weeks. Permission granted. And tell him to report up here at once. The Old Men will want to hear about this. I wouldn't want to be in his boots."

"If I'd been gone this long I wouldn't have bothered to come back," the Watcher said.

"They'd have found him sooner or later. He couldn't stay up forever," the captain

said. "Better get those signals out." And the young Watcher went back to his post, shaking his head over anyone foolish enough to anger the Old Men, while the captain put through a call to Committee headquarters.

Between the frequent tests and long periods of questioning, Ool was also wondering where he had been. Two weeks gone out of his life without the slightest glimmer of a memory about them. Two weeks of floating in space. Had Loris been dead all the time? Or had she died while he lay unconscious? Had he—could he have killed her without knowing it?

Furiously Ool tried to assemble his thoughts, to force his tired brain back over all that had happened, trying to find some explanation.

He could remember perfectly except for the last two weeks. The Invasion—which had threatened to wipe out Civilization. When, in the last desperate moments, the untested Gilkite rays had been used, and like an invisible screen, had held off the foe. How he alone had stood for hours at the machines, after Gilk, the froglike Martian inventor had run from the scene, howling with terror.

The crowds claiming him as the hero of the hour, screaming for the sight of him. Then the meeting with Loris—Loris of the silver hair, the long slim body which gleamed like pearl, the husky voice.

It had been a struggle to get the Old Men to grant them permission to mate, for Loris was a Venusian and not at all the proper sort of mate for a Warrior. But with the success of Gilkite, there might be no more need for Warriors—so permission was granted. And now Loris was dead.



Once more Ool was summoned before the committee.

"The committee agrees," said the Oldest Man, "that you could not have been responsible for the death of your mate."

"The Gilkite—" Ool began.

"Only Gilk knows positively what to expect from it, and he cannot be found. However, our scientists have given you every known test. And believe me, Captain, if there were the slightest suspicion in the minds of any one of them, the order would have been given for your immediate destruction. We would take no chances on your being a carrier of death rays."

"And Loris?"

"You will remember that the committee opposed this mating. Although Loris' ancestors—like those of all of us—were Terrans, the generations had adapted themselves to life on Venus. We do not know what changes have taken place; how they will be affected by situations which are normal to us."

Ool stood silent. In his own mind, that did not answer the question of what had happened to Loris, or what had gone on during the two weeks.

"Unfortunately," the Oldest Man went on smoothly, as if answering his thoughts, "we have no way of telling what did happen. There was a flaw in the communications system of your ship. Shortly after you took off the Security Screen went blank."

The prisoner felt the blood slowly rising in his face. The screen had gone blank, but it had been no accident.

**H**E REMEMBERED Loris coming up behind him as he worked on the screen.

"What are you doing?" she asked curiously.

"Sh," he warned. He worked a moment more, then the screen went blank.

"This is one ship that isn't going to have any Security Check for a while," he announced with satisfaction.

"Won't you get into trouble?"

"Probably, but it will be worth it." He grinned at her appreciatively. Loris was wearing a robe of misty green, through which her body gleamed as though she stood in the midst of a soft cloud. Ool shook his head.

"Good thing I turned it off when I did. If some old Security Watcher could see you now, his hardened arteries would probably break into a million pieces."

Loris laughed huskily and stretched her arms above her head. The green mist settled slowly around her ankles. He could remember his vague surprise that the pearly-hued flesh was not cold as she came into his arms, but warm, quite warm—

Was he imagining it, or was there a twinkle in the eye of the Oldest Man?

"The Old Men," he was saying drily, "are not too old to have memories. The destruction of a Security Check could be considered a major crime but, since there is no war, the committee is willing to take into consideration your excellent record as Commander of the Patrol—and the circumstances. It is regrettable that we cannot tell what did happen to your mate, but the committee agrees that you are not to blame. You are free to go, Captain."

Ool walked out into the sunlight. He was free but Loris was dead.

He soon found that he was not alone in his grief. Messages poured in. With the familiarity they always feel toward their heroes, the people had made his loss their own. And when he met Tanya, the exotically Martian dancer, they shared his happiness.

There was no attempt this time to disconnect the Security Screen, so the Watchers were able to tell exactly what happened. The two merely fell asleep. Ool—as he must have done before—slept for several days, as if he had been drugged, then awoke to find himself a widower for the second time. Nothing had happened, but Tanya was dead.

The examination to which Ool was submitted now was even more thorough than the one he had undergone earlier. The results were the same. Once more he was found innocent.

But if the committee absolved him, many of the people did not. Black looks were thrown at him, people began to edge away from him in the streets.

Ool did not blame them. To him, it was as simple as it was to them. Two women had mated with him; two women were dead. The fault was his.

There were plenty of places where they

didn't care who you were or what you had done as long as you had the price of a drink. Ool found them all. In them gathered the outcasts of half a dozen planets—thieves, murderers, saboteurs—and in the midst of them, Captain Ool, the pride of the Interplanetary Patrol, tried to drink himself into oblivion.

He was well on his way one night sitting alone at his table when a girl came to the door and looked in, as if searching for someone. Not the sort of girl you'd expect to find in a place like this; she was clean and healthy. Her short golden curls gleamed through the blue haze, and her firm-muscled young body in its short tunic was the focus of many bleary eyes as she threaded her way between the tables.

"Ool, I've been looking for you," she cried. He looked at her hazily.

"You don't want me," he spoke carefully, managing not to slur his words. "I'm Ool, the lady killer. I'll get you if you don't watch out." He giggled and tipped up the bottle. It was empty so he waved the waiter over.

"My capac—capacity's increasing," he told the girl. "At first I couldn't finish one bottle. Now I can almost finish two."

"Ool, listen—" she caught at his arm.

He brushed her aside and reached for the bottle in the waiter's hand.

The girl beckoned the waiter aside, whispered to him. He shook his head, then nodded as she slipped something into his hand. They came to the table.

"You'd better go with the lady," the waiter advised, but Ool ignored him and took another drink. The waiter lifted him to his feet. Through the thickening fog Ool saw the man's fist go back.

Then came the oblivion he wanted.

HE AWOKE in what seemed to be a laboratory. It seemed familiar. So did the voices he heard, both talking at once. They broke off as he moved.

"Ryyn, he's coming to," the girl's voice cried.

Ool looked up. Standing over him were two figures in white tunics. Both had the same blue eyes and short golden hair. He closed his eyes and shook his head to clear it, then wished he hadn't.

The girl laughed happily.

"You're not seeing double," she assured him. "Don't you remember us?"

Ool opened his eyes once more. The words, the girl's tone, set his fuzzy brain to working. Of course—the man was Ryyn, who had been one of his best friends at the Academy. Ryyn, whose brilliant mind had already won him a recommendation for a place on the committee; the youngest man ever to be considered.

Then the girl—the girl who had come after him—must be Ryaa, his twin sister. Ool remembered her as a slim, boyish kid. There was certainly nothing boyish about her appearance now.

Ool tried to sit up and instantly Ryaa was by his side, helping him.

"Just take it easy," she advised. "Ryyn is going to give you something to make you feel better."

"Ryaa, I am not in the business of making hangover remedies," Ryyn growled. But at the same time he thrust something into Ool's hand. "Drink," he commanded.

Ool obeyed, shuddering.

"Anything that tastes that bad should either kill or cure," he said. "Probably be better for me if it killed."

"Don't say that," Ryaa cried. "Ryyn is going to help you, aren't you?"

"Nobody can help me." He buried his face in his hands. "For all I know I really may have killed them."

Ryyn nodded.

"There's always that chance but I don't think so. Anything that deadly would show up in a test. But I'll have to know more about what happened—"

Step by step he led Ool back over every detail, from his meeting with each girl to her death.

Ryaa sat beside Ool, her hand in his, trying not to wince when he tightened his grip at some painful memory.

"Thanks," Ryyn said at last. "I think that's all I need right now. Sorry if I had to hurt you but I'm not in a position to keep up with the news. If we can do anything you'll have Ryaa to thank for it. She dragged me away from my experiments and made me promise to do what I could—or else," he grinned at his sister, "she threatened to foul things up and leave

me hanging somewhere in space indefinitely."

Ool stared at the girl beside him. This didn't sound like the quiet little Ryaa he had known. But her scarlet face showed that at least a part of Rynn's statement was true.

"Now," Rynn continued, "I have things to do. Ryaa, why don't you take this big fellow in tow, and the two of you go out and have a good time?"

"Do you think it's wise?" Ool asked.

"Oh, yes," Ryaa breathed. Rynn grinned.

"I think so. I want you to forget as completely as possible that this conversation ever took place. For a few days try not to think about it or me. It will help me if you don't."

When Ool began to be seen in public with another girl, excited whispers spread the news rapidly. Sympathetic glances came Ryaa's way but she seemed not to notice them. Before long some of her gaiety transferred itself to Ool, and for a time he forgot the tragedy hanging over him.

He was reminded abruptly by a summons from Rynn.

"I know the answer," he told Ool, "but we will have to have proof. The committee has given permission for an experiment. If Ryaa is willing to take a chance—"

"I'll do anything to help Ool," Ryaa said fervently.

"I thought so," her brother answered. "So I asked the committee to grant you two permission to mate."

"No," Ool cried hoarsely. "Not Ryaa. I don't want her to die too."

"Nothing will happen to Ryaa if you both do exactly as I say. It's our only chance to prove your innocence. Besides, I've already made the announcement. There's nothing you can do about it now."

Ool glared at him helplessly, then sank into a chair. Ryaa came to him and put her arms around him.

"You said you were willing to do what Rynn wanted. So am I. If he says I'll be all right, I will."

"Well," Ool was only half convinced. "If it's all right with Ryaa. What do you want us to do?"

"Just one thing right now—just stay here till I give the word."

Rynn's announcement spread quickly, and the reception was what might have been expected. The people were shocked.

"I don't think the committee should allow it," was the usual comment.

"There may be more women than men in the Universe, but if Ool keeps on mating with them, we'll soon be even," remarked someone with misplaced humor.

WHEN Rynn had decided that the news had spread enough, he gave them the word. Ryaa had voted for the space ship to show that she really wasn't afraid of the jinx, but Rynn forbade that. He had personally chosen a resort, and had used his influence to overcome the owner's reluctance. It was Rynn, too, who had the would-be interviewers and most of the curious crowd cleared away.

Several of the remarks made by the crowd had started Ool to worrying again. And in spite of her brave remarks, he knew that Ryaa was afraid too.

"You don't have to go through with this," he told her. "No one would blame you for walking out."

Ryaa shook her head.

"It will be all right," she insisted. Standing on tiptoe, she caught his face between her hands and pressed her lips to his.

"That's how much I think of your old curse," she murmured and fled into the other room.

When she returned she had changed into a sheer blue gown that just matched her eyes, and did nothing to hide her perfectly formed body. Ool stared. He knew that she had grown up but he hadn't realized how beautiful she had become.

He took a step toward her. But there, standing beside her, were the ghostly figures of Loris and Tanya. He stopped abruptly and his arms fell to his sides.

"I must say you don't act much like an ardent bridegroom," Ryaa complained. "After all, we're supposed to behave normally." She caught his arms and drew them around her. Slipping her arms around his neck she raised her face to his.

Ool's arms tightened around her and his lips met hers.

Behind Ryaa a chair disintegrated with a whispered sigh, unheard by the lovers.

But they did hear the crash of splintering glass as two struggling figures hurtled into the room. Ryaa clung to Ool as the fighters thrashed around them, unrecognizable at first. Then a slim, golden-haired figure seemed to be forcing his opponent down.

"Ryyn," Ryaa exclaimed. "But who—"

The two figures were struggling over some sort of a weapon. A sudden twist of Ryyn's wrist sent it hurtling across the room. Ool scooped it up—a strange sort of gun—and stood ready to aid Ryyn. But it was no longer necessary for Ryyn had pinned the other's arms behind him and now forced him to his feet. He was a dark, squat Martian, who looked like a malevolent frog.

"Gilk!" The name broke from Ool's incredulous lips.

"Gilk," Ryyn agreed. "The only person who had reason to hate you and was clever enough to think up such a fiendish plot. Too clever, really, to be caught in such a simple trap, with you two doing your best to give it away. We were lucky that he was mad with hate, so he didn't notice." He called out and two guards came into the room, one from the door and the other through the broken window. Behind them came the members of the committee.

"Here's our murderer," Ryyn told them. "It shouldn't be hard to prove that he killed the others now that we saw him try to kill Ryaa and Ool."

"Not Ool," Gilk snarled. "I didn't want him to die. Only her. Ool would have stayed alive to suffer again."

"But why?" Ool asked. "We were friends."

"Friends!" Gilk spat the word at him. "After all that you did to me. I invented Gilkite—I alone—the only thing powerful enough to halt an entire invasion force. But you received all the glory."

"Because you were a coward," Ryaa cried, stepping in front of Ool. "You ran away and left him to face the entire fleet alone."

"I wasn't a coward," Gilk told her in a hurt tone. "There was always a chance that something might go wrong; that it might not stop them. Patrol Commanders are plentiful enough; Ool could have been

replaced. But there is only one Gilk. No one could have replaced me." His voice rose to a shriek. "Then Ool took all the credit, and they laughed at me. But their great hero isn't a hero any longer."

"You arranged all that, didn't you?" Ryyn asked.

"Of course I arranged it. No one else would be clever enough. But for me it was simple. A little preparation of mine, slipped into the bride's clothing or perfume. Just a matter of timing. But this time I couldn't get to her things ahead of time. I suppose that was your idea. I had to come and do it myself. And I will!"

With a swift motion he slipped from Ryyn's grasp. A needle glittered in his hand as he threw himself toward Ryaa.

The guards stood helpless. Neither of them could fire without hitting Ryaa. Ryyn started forward but Ool was ahead of him. With one hand he sent Ryaa sprawling out of danger. With the other, which still held the gun, he struck Gilk a smashing blow across the face.

The Martian staggered backward, tripped and fell. He screamed once and was still. Ryyn bent over him.

"He fell on the needle," he announced. "At least it was quick."

"Now I don't suppose that anyone will ever know how to make Gilkite," one of the guards said as they picked up the body.

"Perhaps it's just as well," said the Oldest Man. "It's too dangerous a secret for anyone to possess. But tell us, Ryyn. What made you think of him?"

Ryyn smiled.

"The tools of our trades have changed quite a bit through the ages," he said. "But basically people haven't. The First Murderer that we know of killed his brother out of jealousy. It's still an important motive."

"And with the motive established it wasn't hard to find your killer?" said the Oldest Man. "But you also mentioned that when the experiment was over, you thought that Ool might petition the committee to set aside this latest mating."

Ryyn glanced at Ool, kneeling beside Ryaa, gathering her into his arms.

"I think we'd better forget that part, sir," he suggested.