

## STORIES IN THE DARK

Sarah Beaulieu

This is the shittiest bar in town. It's not a fact to take lightly: every bar in the depths of Ganesha City is filled with dirt, sweat, blood, alcohols of any type, with crimes, settlings of accounts or corruption. But this place is the worst.

Oddly, this part of the city is not just a rough area where you get drunk and fight for pleasure. Heavy drinkers come here to maintain their social life, meet peers and find odd jobs. And sometimes, they enter bars and show up just to say proudly: "Hey, look at me. I'm still alive!"

For an outsider, the depths of Ganesha would look sinister and risky. But for those who know their path across the grime, this area is a place where they feel truly free.

In the middle of this giant anthill stands our bar, the Pralaya. First thing to notice in there is the smell. Alcohol, obviously. Vomit — that would be the consequence of alcohol. Perspiration. Smoke. Lots of smoke. No lights, except the ones coming from the outside. The distinctive characteristic of the Pralaya is that the place is always plunged into the dark, and only enlightened by the vehicle's headlights that slowly pass the bar's window once in a while.

Nothing lasts long between the Pralaya's walls. Once a day, someone gets angry, or drunk, or bored, and smashes a table, breaks a chair or throws a bottle at someone's face. The others get inspired, and after a few minutes, the whole place is shattered. While the brawl is still going on, the owner keeps pouring her homemade alcohol (some say it's made of some fish poison, mixed with rotten fruits and juicy macropedia omnivora for the spicy touch and the lovely purple color). As filthy as it is, the Pralaya is crowded both day and night. If one could see through the darkness of this place, he would witness a pile of laughing pirates crammed together.

Among these pirates is Orlo. Orlo is fat, noisy, and dumb. He can't pronounce a single word correctly. It's like he's always drunk — and he certainly is. Orlo had good times and bad times, but at this moment, he's not in the best period of his life: he lost a hand and an ear in a stupid bet. Who would bet his hand and ear in an already lost gamble? Orlo would.

"Hulia! Another drink! I wont more!" Orlo shouts.

A fat cockroach slowly crosses the table, stops in front of Orlo and gets stuck in a pool of rum.

"Look at this little fellow..." giggles Orlo's seatmate. It kinda looks like you!"

Next to Orlo is sitting Ydris. Ydris has a blast anytime he refers to Orlo obesity. He's pretty confident in his own body: as a hybrid rhino, he considers himself the strongest and sexiest guy of the pack. Even if he can barely see Orlo's reaction, he's pleased with his joke.

"It's drownink into my rum...", Orlo says. Lucky him!"

Orlo is now staring dreamily at the cockroach. But suddenly, he seems to remember something, and looks at Ydris, or at the shape of Ydris that he can distinguish.

“Speakink of drownink... ya know who drowned recently?”

Orlo gives Ydris a broad smile. He always smiles grossly when he has something important to say. He’s very proud of his teeth. He has none.

“You didn’t, obviously”, responds a feminine voice. Yet you had many occasions.”

A slender hand covered with tattoos pours a heavy liquid in Orlo’s bowl. Orlo likes to drink his alcohol out of a bowl. He says it makes him look distinguished. Even in the dark.

“Oh, hallo, Hulia. Didn’t see you comink.

— That’s the whole point of this place. People don’t see me until I want them too.”

She pours the rest of the liquid on the cockroach. That’s how you get rid of parasites in bars.

Ydris can’t take his eyes out of Hulia’s hand. He never saw her face. Neither of the clients ever did.

“Fancy a little drink with me later, Hulia?” Ydris asks with his softer voice.

But Hulia is long gone, vanished in the middle of the mass of pirates. She probably didn’t even hear him. Ydris grumbles. “I wanna hear your story, Orlo. I’m bored. And there’s nothing like a good drowning story.”

Orlo sniffs his bowl. With a grin on his face, he starts:

“So, my bro, he has a business... Dangerouz stuff. Not supposed to chat ‘bout it, but... he trade informations.”

“I see. Informations... Shitty business, Ydris chuckles. Crazy dangerouz.”

Orlo ignores him.

“Last night he was listenink to pirates radio. Ya know. Tryink to get some useful data to sell. First think he hear is a strange noice, like a broken robot or somethink. Then male voice. He hear this man sayink Gada’s down.”

“Stop here for a second. Are you saying he heard the Gada’s accident on radio?”

— He did, Orlo answers proudly.

— You’ve been drinking too much of that bowl”, Ydris says with a smirk.

But Orlo never stops a story on its way. He keeps going:

“This guy on the radio, he has a weird accent and he say Gada’s down, Gada’s down... My bro’, he try to locate the ship. He smell good business. Sometimes he hear the broken robot again, it go like hiiiiik, hiiiiik, hiiiiik, and it scare the hell out of him, hiiiiik, hiiiiik, hiiiiik... Finally my bro’ track the ship. He spot it on his rodar. The ship has landed in the middle of the Living Sands...”

Orlo pauses. He likes his little dramatic effect. Some pirates in the bar stopped talking. He hooked his audience.

“Sameone take the radio and my bro’ he hear hiiik... Sand everywhere... iik... It’s movink... and it go on like thiz for a minute. The sand, it’s crawlink inside the ship. The radio guy, he’s describink what’s happenink, maybe he want some help but no one’s there and no one’s comink. He say he see faces in the sand. The ones of people drowned before him. Or maybe it’s just the sand’s face itself.”

Orlo takes a look around him. He can't see anything except the silver glimmer of belts where guns and knives are hung. But he can feel the strong breaths of liquor of the people who gathered quietly around his table.

"The guy's alone in the cab. Hiiiiik... Faces bumpink against the ship... He's loosink his mind. Totally loosink it. That crazy robot voice disrupt the words. Can't... hiiik... get out... sand... hiiik... under the door... My bro', he don't stop listenink cause that's his job, but he can't take it any more. It's lookink at me! It's comink to me!, the guy keep screaming. THE SAND!"

Orlo stops.

"Last thing my bro' hear is: Hiiiiik... And silence."

Orlo gives his audience a lopsided smile. All the drinkers stopped talking. Nobody says anything for a few seconds, until a vehicle passes the Pralaya's window and breaks the precarious silence, as well as the darkness.

"Bullshit!", shouts someone.

"Bedtime story!", yells another cracked voice.

Clients get back to their table. Despite the dark, they all seem to have a personal radar to lead them straight to their beers. The conversations pick up again, and the usual hubbub.

"Yep, that's a cool story, Orlo. Yet not believable", Ydris says.

Orlo raises his right hand:

"Truth only!"

Ydris removes something from his pocket and puts it on the table. Coins.

"Do you know where all this money comes from?"

— Ya robbed that Aakesh douchbag?!, Orlo gasps.

— Believe it or not: I earned it. Like: I really earned it."

Ydris leans a bit forward in his seat and lowers his voice.

"What your brother told you? It's just craps. I know that, because I know someone who saw the whole thing... The Gada was attacked.

— Really?!" Orlo shouts.

Ydris immediately pounds the table. Orlo backs off instinctively. Ydris' horn stopped a few centimeters from his nose.

"That's supposed to be confidential. Like your brother's business, got it? Keep your mouth shut!"

Orlo nods and raises his half of an arm. He just forgot he had no left hand anymore.

"Got it...", he speaks softly. Spit it out!"

Ydris hesitates — he likes a good dramatic effect as much as Orlo — and starts again:

"It was her. She attacked the Gada."

Orlo frowns. He's not buying it. This is too big, even for him.

"Her...? No. No way."

Orlo keeps shaking his head, like he's trying to chase some stupid thoughts out of his head. Never worked for him.

"She's just a myth!"

— Oh, you think so?" whispers Ydris. "You really do think so?"

Hulia's thin pale hand suddenly appears from nowhere and fills Orlo's bowl.  
"Hulia is the living legend here", Ydris says with his most seductive voice. Right, Hulia?"

Once again, Hulia leaves before answering. But Ydris doesn't really care. He got to deep into his own story and he goes on:  
"But this girl, the pirate's hunter, she's a real thing. She hired some guys to trick the Gada's crew and trap them. One of them told me the whole story. Wanna hear?  
— You're friend with a traitor? Orlo reacts with suspicion.  
— That's not betrayal. That's just good business."

Orlo shrugs his shoulders. He takes a long sip of his liquor. A vehicle passes by and lights his face for a second. Ydris notices Orlo's unruly, frizzy dark hair. As a bald rhino, Ydris has always been jealous of Orlo's hair, but he would prefer to die rather than admitting it.  
"This guy, this acquaintance of mine, he was there when it happened. He saw the Gada being boarded, and her stepping in. She wore a red hood so her face would remain covered, but he saw what she did."

Ydris takes a deep breath and continues.  
"She is about ten feet high. My friend said her shadow is almost as terrifying as her actual body. But the most horrific thing about her is that she has four arms. Two in the front, two in the back."

Orlo glances at his missing hand.  
"Two in the back...?"  
— She only wears red to hide the blood on her clothes. And blood she knows about.  
— Did she kill the crew?  
— She slaughtered them. One by one. A sword strike and it was over. So that they can never tell anything about her."

Orlo looks at Ydris jaw — that's the only thing he can see at the moment. He's still skeptical.  
"I don't think she ever existed. Maybe my bro' told me craps. But no her. No she. That's just a creepy legend for mums whose kids are would-be criminals. Not going to work on me!"

Orlo's nose is now purple. He drank too much of that homemade liquor.  
"So where is that money comink from?"

Ydris puts the coins back in his pocket.  
"I told my friend I wouldn't tell anything about her.  
— So ya didn't earn the money. That's just blackmoil."

Ydris laughs loudly.  
"Right. 'Blackmoil'. Let's call it that way.  
— But ya told me eveythink. I could tell everybody.  
— You won't, Orlo, or you'll loose that other fat hand of yours."

Someone suddenly coughs a few steps from them. They shouldn't have heard it in the constant noise, but this voice has a very distinctive sound.  
The lacking of light hid it for a moment, but a red face is now slowly appearing in

the dark, as Orlo and Ydris try to discern the yet familiar shape.

Rusty Head has a partially burned forehead. His skin up there is of a beautiful orange color, earning him the nickname of Rusty Head. Also, Rusty Head is an old guy, and sometimes, we can hear his bones cracking. Or maybe it's just his teeth rubbing against one another. Rusty's voice is hoarse and dissonant. As soon as he starts talking, it seems like he hasn't speak a single word for a few years. Let's say Rusty Head is completely rusty, but the head is the obvious part.

"Are you two trying to be discreet? It's not working."

Rusty Head has joined Orlo and Ydris table in silence. He has a way of talking that tells us he doesn't really care about what's happening around him.

"How long have you been here? Ydris reacts.

— Oh, I heard everything. The drowning in the sand... The all-powerful and quite ridiculous version of her... Four arms, really? Is this a twisty fantasy of yours, Ydris?", Rusty Head says scoldingly.

Ydris growls, and spits on the table. Hulia's voice strikes right next to him like she never left the area.

"Don't do that again, or I toss you out on your ass."

Orlo has a great deal of difficulty retraining his laughter.

"My version of the Gada's disappearance differs from yours. And for a good reason: mine is the real one."

Rusty Head grinds — his voice grinds, his bones grind, his teeth grind — as he states:

"The AI did this.

— The AI? Which AI?"

— The Gada's AI. Did you ever hear about her? Really bright, sharp mind, you could mistake her for a human or a hybrid if you just heard her voice. She's brilliant. I used to work on systems like her. I still have a place, somewhere around here, where I can tweak some tools. I never came across something approaching this level of artificial intelligence. She's capable of tremendous things. I witnessed some of them when her system was still an experiment. I know what happened to the Gada."

At this moment, Rusty Head whistles. Someone — but it's not Hulia, she would never obey a whistle — brings him a pint of beer. Rusty Head is never drunk. He already drunk too much during his life to ever be drunk again.

"The AI", he continues, "has her own feelings. That's why I say her: she's an independent spirit, she possesses feelings and she possesses free will. Just like we do. Or... just like we should. She feels like she's part of the Gada's crew. And she is. They trust her and she trusts them. But the saddest thing about artificial intelligences is that they can be easily corrupted. Even as evolved as the Gada's AI. It takes some skills to mess with her circuits, but it's possible. Someone did it.

You know the Gada's crew has its enemies. The crew knows some things about Moksha. Some things they refuse to tell small pirates like us. So once the AI was ready, someone thought that the simplest way to extract informations from the crew was to use her in the first place.

This someone I know... he succeeded in tempering with her circuits. He made her create something we could call a waking nightmare. This is a place where you can be trapped, where you can live nightmares one right after the other in the enclosed area of your mind.

The AI, against her own free will that had just been cut off, formed this ethereal universe of continuing torments.”

Orlo is shaking. He’s glad no one can see him. He’s not the cerebral type, he never dreams of anything, he sleeps well at night, he doesn’t ask himself a lot of questions. This AI thing is too much for him.

“Where are they now?, Ydris asks to Rusty Head, eager to hear the rest.

— They’re sleeping. Kind of... Their bodies are now floating inside the ship, while the AI keeps torturing their minds in that special place, asking for answers about their plans for the Moksha’s gate. But this is also the AI’s personal nightmare. Among the crew are her best friends. Some say she even fell in love with one of them. She still has her feelings. She was torn up in the process. When all of this will end — if it ever ends —, she won’t recover from it. Ever.”

Orlo loudly swallows. He doesn’t like that. At all. But Ydris wants to know more.

As he opens his mouth, a bright light makes him blink. Something is heading towards the bar. A machine of some sort. Clients quickly move out of the window. The light gets brighter and brighter until the machine hits the Pralaya’s window in a deafening sound. BANG! The glass bursts into pieces and falls on the drunken heads.

Some say they saw Hulia’s face that night, while the damaged vehicle’s headlights kept lighting the place. On the next evening, Orlo, Ydris and Rusty Head entered several bars of Ganesha City and started telling their sides of the story. One said he saw the most beautiful woman he had ever encountered, the other claimed he just glimpsed a smile with golden teeth, the last one swore Hulia had no face at all, but just a hand covered with tattoos.