

Kadath 2.0

In the harsh and frigid emptiness of space, Kadath races on its orbit and spins under the blanket of clouds mercifully hiding its horrors.

It was after the first phase of planetary colonization that planetologists aimed their powerful eyes of metal and silicon, the orbital telescopes, towards the less promising and less charted regions of the cosmos. And when the non-human, almost infallible intelligences dedicated to elaborating the unconceivable mass of data coming from the telescopes finally rendered their verdict, a stellar system stood out different and sinister.

The star at its center, which in those days it was customarily called Ra, was a horrible brown dwarf, a ball of crimson color corrupted with vast dark blotches in which many could see terrible images of demons and other nightmare creatures. And the star pulsed, slowly and steadily, letting the most sensitive and imaginative observers imagine it was a colossal, monstrous heart.

But in those days of frantic and triumphant expansion of the human race, it wasn't a few bad dreams that could stop such mighty machine. Soon, a robotic exploration spaceship was rerouted to that system and its artificial mind, immune from suggestions, did what it was programmed to do: explore, measure, gather data and send those back to Earth as a beam of pure energy through the space-time folded by the powerful machines it carried on board.

The vessel, due to some queer joke of fate, had been informally christened *H.P. Lovecraft*. That system, it was established, contained the disturbing brown dwarf; one carbonaceous dwarf planet utterly unsuitable for life; then a second planet of terrestrial type covered in dark impenetrable clouds; and farther off in the empty cosmic abyss, a gas giant ornate with a massive accretion disk, a sub-stellar object destined to remain dead and frozen. It was a system of scarce interest, while in its proximity there were a few others sporting inhabitable planets and plentiful asteroids and comets that could be mined for metals and especially water.

But the second planet's clouds turned out to be a surprise: their composition was close to that of city smog in those long gone days when the preferred fuel was coal. The *Lovecraft* then, on the basis of its sophisticated euristics, decided to launch an automated probe with the pragmatic name APE-W120 towards the planet in order to study its surface. The probe first released a swarm of small satellites to produce radar maps of the surface, which soon revealed more anomalies: the crust of that planet was rich of metals, ferrous and also actinides, and infested with active volcanoes that gave it a repulsive and forbidding look. But the scientist were also jubilant, because on the surface of that nightmarish world there was liquid water too, in streams and lakes. That's when a researcher with a dark sense of humor gave the planet the name Kadath, and it immediately stuck.

Then APE-W120 executed the second phase of its program: descend to Kadath analyzing the atmosphere along the way and after touch down release a rover

to explore the surface up close. Kadath's atmosphere turned out to be hot and humid, dusty, polluted and even radioactive - but still able to sustain human life. As the gray and dense fog of London's tragic Big Smog was not immediately lethal to its citizens in good health.

The lander touched down using its airbags in a flatland at what was judged a safe distance from the nearest volcano, on the shores of a lake and under the feeble light of a blood red Ra. As far as the glass eyes of the machine could see, except on the steep slopes of the volcanoes, the soil was covered in a kind of moss or lichen that made the landscape appear coated in a sick gray-green mold, that emitted a weak phosphorescence during the stuffy Kadath nights. The rover ventured into the gullies crossing the plain and discovered fungi-like formations, detestable dirty gray protrusions, rounded like cauliflowers left to decay and rot under the rain, that reached a few meters in diameter. From the protrusions a tar-like fluid oozed, mixed with water in the streams and covered part of the lake in an oily layer on which a repulsive flora akin to hairy dandelions prospered and let its meter-high flower heads sway in the winds.

On that sort of prairie roamed herds of disgusting dark and gelatinous forms, like giant amoebas of size ranging from twenty centimeters to two meters. Evidently those beings fed off the ubiquitous moss and especially the oily fungi. Occasionally, groups of gastropods appeared and preyed on the amoebas, devouring that gelatin in manners that caused some to retch among the scientists observing the discoveries from that morbid world in the rooms of the forward station Saturnia.

All the while other groups of beings similar to winged arthropods appeared to take care of the amoebas and protected them from the gastropod predators in exchange of some kind of secretion scraped from the back of those herbivores - if such a term is applicable. This obscene mimic of what could have been a terrestrial ecosystem both fascinated and repelled scientists and the public at large. The local fauna showed only scant curiosity for those alien machines landed suddenly in their midst, proof that life on Kadath was abundant but not intelligent.

A few days later, tho, a violent tremor of the land sent amoebas stampeding across the plain; the rover was overcome and destroyed but the stubborn robot kept recording to the last second, sending back even too close-up views of those gelatinous abominations. The tremors became more and more intense until the nearest volcano exploded with unpredicted force and destroyed also the lander that remained alone in the plain. Its mission completed, the *Lovecraft* left the Kadath system to go and explore other, more cheerful, worlds.

Ma sulla Terra, i sognatori morbosi, gli occultisti e gli amanti dell'orrido furono galvanizzati. Raccolsero abbastanza fondi per costruire una nave dall'opprimente estetica gotica e propriamente battezzata *Randolph Carter* ed una squadra di dieci arditi e facoltosi accompagnata da un equipaggio di quattro duri veterani professionisti dei viaggi spaziali fece rotta per Kadath sotto l'attenzione spasmodica dei media.

But in the Solar System, the morbid dreamers, the occult scholars and the addicted to the horrible and portentous were galvanized. They raised enough funds to build a spaceship of oppressive Gothic aesthetics which was aptly christened *Randolph Carter*; a team of ten wealthy and daring among those obsessed with Kadath, under the guidance of four though, seasoned professionals of space travel, set course from the shipyards of Saturnia towards Kadath, under the spasmodic attention of the media.

The weeks-long voyage went according to plan – as much a pioneering voyages like that can go – and finally the black and spire-ornate *Carter* entered orbit around Kadath. Some more days were spent for the final preparations, then the landing module carrying the ten explorer-tourists and two veterans landed on Kadath, while the Captain and Second Officer remained on the orbiting ship.

After only a few hours, the expedition started in enthusiasm turned to horror and tragedy. Only few, scattered fragments of footage survived, and those disturbing records show terrified people screaming or muttering in panic, out-of-context sentences like “That cannot be true, cannot!”. Only the first officer, a collected woman with a military past, looks straight into the camera and gravely states: “This is hell. May our sacrifice be a lesson, never set foot on Kadath!”.

The *Carter* kept trying to make contact with the landing party for a few days, but when no answer came, she made somberly back to the Solar System. The two survivors returned changed forever, became anxious and tormented and always remained extremely reticent about the terrible incidents of the Kadath expedition. Even in front of an official investigative commission and under the pressure of the entire Network, their only joint statement was: “We should have understood it sooner, Kadath is not for humans”.

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