

# The Path to R

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THE PATH TO R

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Written by Mark Russo.

To Rich, Lee and Tomek.



A vehement explosion shook the air, and the woods were no longer silent. Birds strewn in all directions, rustling among the density of the leaves.

I dove into a depression in the humid soil between two pines. My ears rang wildly, and I brought my hands to them.

I stood and ran toward the building, still stunned by the air displacement; the smaller trees' branches scratched my elbows and forearms.

When I reached the outer court, things looked much worse than I had anticipated. The front of the construction was fractured in many points and crumbled in a cloud of smoldering debris. The smoke and dirt raised a high column of dust for meters into the air.

I could not see it, but it looked like a rift—a hole in the ground leading to Plane K opened somewhere below that cement construction.

I assumed everyone in the building was dead; it would be too dangerous to check for survivors.

I perched aimlessly outside EIBM's main building—the business school we had used as a door to this world, crowded with humans and their interest in weather conditions.

Another loud explosion threw me to the ground, and more smoke expanding in all directions.

Fortunately, I didn't need to breathe. Being more precise, I had a human body with regular lungs, but I did not use them often.

As my vision blurred further, my mind wandered elsewhere; I needed something resembling a plan, but all I could think was that my tie was too tight around my neck.

I could not finish that thought as the earth below me rumbled with a thundering roar.

The soil breaking open could mean only one thing: James was back.

“Reveal yourself, Frank! I'll find you eventually,” he screamed.

His voice was close; my ears still hurt.

I clenched my left fist to my chest, the gesture to trigger my invisibility skill and conceal me from both humans' and my people's sight. It would buy me some time.

Even though his voice rang loudly, I was not aware of his exact position.

An inferno raised from EIBM's wreckage, coloring the evening night in a shade of crimson.

My powers had begun weakening since the opening of the rift. Only one viable option remained, one course of action that made sense—running.

I sprinted toward the woods in front of me. I put all that human's body effort into a series of rapid movements. It still looked dull. It was noisy, and my heart pumped much faster.

The body of a man in his late 40s was such a lousy, primitive device. Even if I couldn't die, that flesh cage surely could, and that implied a lot of very unpleasant side effects.

Behind me, stones and gravel exploded in all directions.

"I know now. Your plans are clear to me. Thanks for opening my eyes, Mr. Sneider. Is that even your real name?"

A tree on my left fractured because of a Rockjet. I had never witnessed him being capable of infusing so much power in that skill.

We should have never let a human being learn about the Paths. We should have never created one specifically for him.

I felt no safer surrounded by trees nor under those pines and larches canopy.

He would keep chasing me, would hunt me down at all costs.

It was my fault. I had deceived him. I had played with his life. I had damned him forever. I had to devise something fast.

"They told me that I was crazy. They sent me to a psychiatric ward. My own family thinks I'm nuts too."

From his scouring noise, I assumed he was moving around on a Stone Board.

The images of James conjuring one for the first returned to me. ‘This is the coolest thing ever,’ he had said, while trying to keep his balance on that piece of crude rock. A *surfboard for the dryland* he had called it.

With my back against an irregular larches bark, I tapped into my energy reserve again. My forehead felt as clammy as I had never experienced before.

He was quieter now—no more shrieking—but I still expected him to attack me at any moment.

I glanced at my tailor-made jacket and its torn fabric stripes swaddling my wrists. I concentrated and gathered my residual energy and put it to work.

The Double I wanted to conjure appeared—something that looked exactly like me but wasn’t. A doppelganger.

I ordered it to run toward the school, straight into James’s anger.

So it did; it ran mindlessly into certain demise.

Behind me, more rocks struck the ground, the trees, and everything else around. James had seen my clone much earlier than I thought.

I kept running. An intense smell of rotting leaves hit my nostrils. I scratched my left eyebrow on a broken branch. I didn’t check how bad I had damaged the fake human facial skin. The number of vegetable trunks surrounding me multiplied as I ran deeper into the woods.

The sound of James’s fury dimmed while my legs pulsed from all the sprinting.

I used the Double skill twice more. It nearly drained my entire energy reserve, but it proved effective.

Again, I ordered them both to find James and draw his attention away from me.

An animal appeared before me. We stared into each other’s pupils for a moment.

After I showed it what I hid below the pink of my skin, the thing scampered as fast as it could.

I paid no attention to the direction I traveled. I was just getting the farthest distance possible from that damn building.

“Do you think we would let you run away, Frank?”

Someone appeared before me, and I crashed into him and fell to the ground, my face covered with dirt. I raised my gaze with a lump in my throat.

“Dear, Frank. This is not what I had asked of you. We had a deal. You should have granted me access to this plane before anyone else would arrive.”

He hurled my body against a nearby tree. I think some of my bones broke.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, Aaragul. I never agreed to that. The Great Communion would never tolerate such an insult.”

Gosh, my vision became even more clouded. I had no clue pain could be this intense.

He appeared by my side, using another trick; he could use his skills so fast. “Okay. This is what will happen now. I’ll unburden you of this pathetic human costume you are wearing. You’ll return to Plane K and serve a better purpose. I do not want to spill the beans.” He smirked in that human’s face they had gotten him. “Have a safe trip, sweetie.”

I didn’t even comprehend what he did next. It was not pleasant though. I woke somewhere else, away from the woods, EIBM, and all the humans.

I was home. They had returned me to Plane K.

I appeared by the Creation Ponds—large pools of murky water all Plane K inhabitants had visited at least once in their existence... they moment they were created. Plane K’s perpetual twilight colored my carapace a dark shade of green.

I didn’t look like a man anymore; I no longer had arms or legs. I lay on the ground, and my long and sinuous body coiled on the soft soil. I kind of missed having this appearance—the one I always had.

I crawled forward. My mind processed too many things at once. Where would I head next?

“Oh, look who finally got back. I have been waiting for you, Vagras.”

He called me by my Plane K name and not by the human one, Frank Snider. It had been weeks since I’d heard that word pronounced.

“Oh, I didn’t expect you to be here. It’s been some time since I last saw you, Millat.”

My first meeting back home could have been much worse than that. A member of the Great Communion would have probably ended me at first sight.

“I’m sorry, but this conversation will not be very pleasurable for you.”

I looked into that heinous mass of tendrils and tentacles, given it had no eyes or anything I could glare into. *My people* have the most different shapes and colors.

“Come on, lay it on me. What’ll happen?”

I didn’t think attacking him would have been any good.

“There have been changes with our plans... those regarding the Plane with the humans.”

I did not understand why he hesitated.

“At the moment, a few members of the Great Communion are in Plane R, closing the rift that opened there. They’re holding you responsible for all that happened in the area.”

Aaragul—he blamed that on me. I still have all the memories, all those events that led to this point. They could have checked them. It would work out just fine.

“I will have to face them, correct?”

“Yes. We’ll try once again to invade the humans’ place,” he added.

“They appointed you as the EIBM’s new dean, didn’t they? They gave you my role.”

“They did. You’ll still train another human, working alongside me. They still think it’s worth to share our knowledge, the Paths. Another human will learn to use our skills. James was an unfortunate mistake.”

That really sucked.

“We created one for James, and look where we are now,” I said.

He remained silent, just floating in midair.

“There is more. I’m sorry about all this. They said you’d be demoted.”

*Demoted?* They really wanted to punish me. If I only had a way to retaliate.

“Why did they ask you to tell me all this? Why didn’t they do it themselves?”

“I volunteered. We’ll work together. I wanted to get off on the right note.”

He was bullshitting me. He was feeding me business talk. Well, we *were* running a business school for the humans, but that didn’t mean I was keen on hearing corporate stuff like this.

I realized I had gotten lost in my thoughts, so I just nodded.

“We will do great stuff in Plane R. I think they overburdened you with carrying out this important assignment all by yourself.”

More of that business shit. God, I hated that fucker.

“Sure. I look forward to that.”

I had nothing better than lying to his face by that point.

The surrounding landscape changed. I was no longer in the same area of Plane K. Someone had teleported me, again. Or perhaps it was just an illusion—or many of them, just happening at the same time.

It was dark in all directions. I couldn’t even see the tip of my tail. Then I realized what that was.

The Circular Chamber’s grey walls materialized all around me. I stood before the members of the Great Communion, the most powerful covey I had ever heard of.

“We see you know. We see this does not surprise you,” all of them spoke as a single voice.

I had to stop the flow of my thoughts and say nothing.

“We see whatever you think. Don’t bother trying to hide it.”

They stopped talking. I was even more confused. I hadn't a clue about how many skills they had already used on me.

"You will now be demoted."

Nothing happened. I expected lights and thunders, or, I don't know, anything that would denote me being demoted.

"You are now an Apprentice of the Path of Mind. Follow Millat's lead on your new expedition to Plane R. We will assign you a new human to train."

I wanted to ask a question or point out Aaragul's interference, but I didn't have time. They disappeared.

The lights switched on, even though we have no power grid in Plane K. A bull's eye illuminated an area one meter around me.

That was the worst day I could remember in a very long time.

And again, out of the blue, I was somewhere else. I pulled myself together and stood. That proved already complicated enough. My body felt uncomfortable, or, to be more precise, I lacked physical strength. I don't have feelings; I'm not a weak flesh-and-bones creature, but, in that moment, I would have enjoyed screaming and throwing things all around.

Those fuckers talking as one, they didn't even check my memories that would have proved Aaragul's role in all that happened in Plane R. They didn't give me a chance to explain or to say anything at all. Damn. That was just unfair. Unjust.

As all of this was not already enough; they had demoted me to apprentice. My goal for the mission in Plane R was to gain more skills—or even increase my level on the Path of Mind—not being stripped of what I already had.

I was in the woods again, heading back to Plane R. *Reality*, as humans called it. The daylight was dazzling, so I assumed it was morning or lunch time. Go figure why my eyes were so close to the ground. Human beings can be short, but they gave me an extra small one this time around. I surveyed my arms and legs, and, again, if I had any resemblance of a

nervous system, I would feel sheer horror. Fur covered my entire miniscule body. It was not the real kind; it felt more like an industrial product. Fake. My arms ended in two approximative hands. Only my thumbs were separated from the rest of the fingers. I could still grab and carry stuff, but I'd never be capable of precise movements.

I stood about fifty centimeters tall. My face had the shape of an almost-perfect circle with two fake-fur half-moons strapped on top. Those, I assumed, to be my ears.

I was a fucking teddy bear.

## More about me:



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## **About the Author**

I was born and raised in Italy. I'm a psychologist and I work as a recruiter. A few years ago, I left my country and moved to Poland. Most importantly, I'm a SciFi writer.

