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PATH OF THE RENEGADE

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# PATH OF THE RENEGADE

## Andy Chambers

For millennia, Asdrubael Vect has ruled the dark city of Commorragh, crushing any who dare to cross him. His reach is long and his position unassailable... or so he thinks. Yllithian, an ambitious archon with the desire to unseat the tyrant, joins forces with a twisted haemonculus in an attempt to revive a long-dead warrior. It is the only way to challenge the might of the overlord, before Vect is able to discover their treachery. But a cataclysm is coming, and Yllithian's actions may in fact be the cause...



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Andy Chambers** is a veteran writer for the Warhammer 40,000 universe with more than twenty years experience creating worlds dominated by giant robots, spaceships and dangerous aliens. He worked at Games Workshop as lead designer of the Warhammer 40,000 miniatures game for three editions before moving to the PC gaming market to work on the hit real time strategy game *Starcraft 2* by Blizzard Entertainment. Andy has written several short stories and two novels for Black Library, *Survival Instinct* and *Path of the Renegade*. Andy has recently returned to the UK and is living in Nottingham.

*Path of the Renegade* can be purchased direct from this website and GW mail order, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, and better bookstores.

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RAIN.

Rain encompassed the world, it thundered down in a ceaseless torrent, cascading from the tree-tops in twisting waterfalls. All that could be seen was greenery distorted by a wall of water. Sindiel had never experienced anything like it. He huddled miserably in the bole of a titanic hardwood tree wrapped in his camouflage cape as he had done for three days now, suffering through periodic downpours and the steaming tropical humidity that followed them. Three days also spent enduring the biting insects and inquisitive predators that seemed drawn magnetically to him, to the point where Sindiel had simply given up on trying to remove his flexmetal gloves or hood for relief. Now he endured the cloying sweat-slicked touch of his armour and tried to be patient.

He squinted through his scopesight at the gate in a futile effort to see it through the torrential rain. He didn't need to see the gate to picture it accurately, the two primitive-looking upright stones and capping lintel etched firmly into his mind. Night, day, rain, shine he had watched the gate with the others for three days and seen absolutely nothing out of the ordinary.

Sindiel wasn't overly fond of patience, and his limited supply of it was rapidly becoming exhausted. He was seriously considering petitioning Linthis again that they should move on. The Dark Kin weren't coming here, despite what her complex lunar calculations said about the inactive gate they'd found. Corallyon and Belth couldn't be any happier than he was, although in the end they were bound to align themselves with whatever Linthis wanted just like they always did.

Sindiel had found himself starting to question all the half-hushed whispers he had heard about stopping the wicked soul thieves. All the talk of secret lore and hidden paths had come to this: sitting in a sodden jungle watching an inactive gate and hoping they would show – or rather hoping that they didn't but hanging around *just in case* they did. It was pathetic, and Sindiel felt more pathetic for allowing himself to be trapped by his ego into staying. Leaving now meant proving himself to be less tough than the other Rangers, the old hands, and that simply stuck in his throat too much to be borne.

The rain eventually stopped as suddenly as if it had been turned off at a tap, leaving the jungle fresh and dripping. Within minutes steam was rising from the forest floor where a hundred tiny pools and rills glittered in shafts of light that pierced the high canopy. Sindiel looked at the gate again. It was still there, still exactly as he had seen it a hundred times before; a silvery rivulet of water was running through it, quite picturesque.

A brightly coloured tree snake slithered into Sindiel's hiding place, seemingly intent on making its way into his lap in a friendly yet determined fashion. Sindiel evicted the venomous reptile as gently as he could, earning a few dry bites to his gauntleted hands in the process.

He looked at the gate again. It had changed. Silver now filled the entire space between the uprights and the lintel, a shimmering wall of mercury. Spiral markings on the stones were glowing with a faint inner light as the webway portal aligned and reopened for the first time in three hundred years.

+I's active,+ Linthis's voice whispered in his mind. He was so intent on the active gateway the interruption made him flinch.

+Say again?+ Sindiel thought back. +Yes, the portal's active, I can see it. What do I do?+

It wasn't clear if Linthis's response was just to Sindiel or to the whole group. It was flat and emotionless. +Shoot anything that comes out of it.+

Sindiel fumbled to focus his scope and disable the safety locks on his long rifle, his hands and mind disjointed and disobedient in his sudden panic.

Shapes were emerging from the silver wall. Lithe humanoids clad in darkly burnished armour stepped forth, their weapons jagged with blades and barbs. The nightmarish figures swept their avaricious, red-eyed gaze over the virgin forest in anticipation of new conquest.

+Shoot!+ came the hard, clipped thought of his leader.

Sindiel sighted on a masked helm and fired, jerking the shot so badly in his eagerness and panic that he missed it altogether. He saw two of the soul thieves drop so suddenly it seemed as if the earth had swallowed them up; probably Linthis and Belth getting the kill shots they were always so quietly competitive about.

The Dark Kin's reaction was instantaneous. Half of them turned their weapons on the tree-line and rip-sawed at the foliage with streams of poison-laced hypervelocity splinters. The others grabbed their fallen comrades and dragged them unceremoniously back through the portal. The shooters put up a creditable enough suppressing fire that Sindiel only got off a few snapshots at them before they also ducked and weaved their way into the portal a few seconds later. A sudden silence descended on the scene as the whip-crack echoes of the brief firefight faded away.

'Close in,' Linthis whispered. Sindiel reluctantly slithered closer, barely hearing any sound as the other Rangers moved in behind him. He kept expecting the nightmarish figures to erupt from the portal at any moment, a feeling that got stronger the closer he got to it. He noticed blood sprays where two of the Dark Kin had fallen. They were bright, arterial and definitively fatal. He found he wondered at why the cruel, sadistic soul thieves would risk themselves to recover their dead.

He noticed something else, a small polished sphere half-buried in the mud that looked as if it had been dropped by the fleeing soul thieves. His heart froze when he realised he could be looking at a grenade. No, it was too big for that, and what kind of grenade looked like stone banded in different colours? He realised it was something else entirely just in time to hide it beneath his foot when Corallyon wandered over to find out what was so interesting. Linthis and Belth were busy doing something to the gate to shut it down.

'They took their dead with them,' Sindiel offered by way of explanation. 'I wasn't sure if they were really dead but see,' he pointed to the bloodstains and drag marks, 'dead. We would just take the spirit stones, why bother with empty vessels?'

He'd given Corallyon exactly what she wanted, an opportunity to illustrate her superior knowledge. Sindiel had joined Linthis's band years ago, only a short time after Corallyon, but as an even fractionally senior member Corallyon took pains to belittle Sindiel as a newblood as often as she could. It was the great cycle of life. Eventually a new recruit would come along and it would become Sindiel's privilege to make them miserable in their turn.

'They don't have spirit stones, lackwit,' Corallyon said with relish. 'They go off to the daemon city to get brought back to life in a test tube.' Sindiel felt his own waystone give a cold pulse of warning. The empathic gem had been with him his whole life, it was his soul-anchor, his moral compass. To live without one was so unthinkable dangerous that it was just... well, unthinkable. A private part of him found the thought thrilling.

'Don't talk like that, Corallyon,' Linthis said as she walked up, her silvery hair floating free after its confinement beneath mask and hood. Behind her the portal was closed, and the ancient arch had returned to looking as it had done for centuries. 'It's no daemon city that they come from, it's a real place and they certainly do not suffer daemons to rule there.'

'They eke out eternal lives by preying on the souls of others, taking back what they lose with pain and torture. That's why we work against them. But they aren't daemons, not yet. In some ways I think they're worse.'

The rounded shape beneath Sindiel's foot felt as if it were going to explode after all. He was experiencing the wildest vicarious thrill of his life just by hiding it from Linthis and her pompous little band. It was all he could do to keep from laughing out loud at them. He shifted his weight, pushing the sphere completely out of sight beneath the mud.

'Why didn't you just destroy the gate,' Sindiel asked innocently, 'if you knew they were going to use it to come here and steal people?'

When Linthis replied she spoke as if to a child. 'Because that would damage the webway just that little bit more, Sindiel, and another piece of it would be forever lost.'

'It seems like they get more use out of it than we do,' Sindiel persisted truculently.

'Of course they do, they live in it!' Corallyon blurted.

'That's enough, Corallyon,' Linthis admonished. 'We do not speak of such things. All you need know is that our work here is done. We repelled the Dark Kin and now we move on.'

'Where next?' Corallyon asked, suitably chastened.

'To another maiden world named Lileathanir, a place very much like this one. Our cousins there have also grown lax and all but forgotten the peril of the gates.'

Sindiel reflected that they hadn't so much repelled the soul thieves here as given them a slight pause. Four snipers would not have held them back for long if they had only realised how few stood against them. They were simply lucky that Linthis had the craft to shut the gate from this side before they returned in greater numbers. Most likely once they had gone the Dark Kin would come creeping back anyway; as Corallyon had said, they knew more about the labyrinth dimension because they lived in it.

He decided he would return to the spot later, alone, and see if the object he'd hidden was really what he hoped it was. He felt sure he'd seen that kind of striped banding before on spheres held by old statues on his craftworld. He remembered it was reckoned a symbolic object, like a crown for rulership or a spear for hunting. The sphere represented speech with distant stars.