



Road
Written by Victor Waite
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“What do you mean ‘no one knows where that road goes’?! You’re not making sense,” the young wolf yelled.

The larger wolf straightened in his seat, roused by the insolent fur. “I know for a fact your mum taught you better manners than that,” he growled. “Respect your elders, pup.”

The smaller canine nearly lost his temper, but managed to hold his tongue. “This isn’t about me, grey-muzzle. It’s about that road out there and where it goes. I know you adults are trying to keep something from me, and I know I’m old enough to know now. So tell me!”

“No one’s hidin’ anything from you kid” he scoffed. “No one here knows where it goes. It’s been here longer than any one of us, no one has ever come into town from there, and no one who travelled it ever came back.” The faded lupine paused as he took a swig from his glass, a shudder running down his spine as the fluid burned a path to his core. “It’s just that simple.”

“Liar! I know you’ve been down it! Elizabeth told me so, and she always tells the truth.”

For a brief instant, the elder canine didn’t have an answer. He thought his travels were something that was supposed to stay between them, but apparently that was not the case. Looks like he would have something to discuss with the vixen when he got home tonight. A smug grin spread across the child’s muzzle as he fished for something to say, evidently content with knocking him off guard. He considered simply leaving, but that would only validate the pup. With a heavy sigh, he flagged down a bar maiden for a stronger drink, took a deep drink of the brew, and faced the diminutive tyrant. “What *exactly* did she tell you?”

“She told me that’s the road you came into town on. So where did you come from?”

“That doesn’t matter,” he dismissed. The wolf spent another moment carefully picking his words, much to his smaller counterpart’s irritation. He tried desperately to remember what was said the last time he found himself in this situation, but the exact phrases eluded him. “Look, for the sake of you and your family, drop it. No good will come from you pursuing this further, and it would be for the best if you didn’t bring it back up. I would also prefer you leave my wife out of the matter.”

The younger wolf clenched his fists, unwilling to heed his elder’s advice. “What are you hiding? Why won’t you just tell me?!”

“It’s not that simple,” he snarled. “If I told you exactly what was down there, it would be the end of me!” He took a moment to collect himself, letting out a huff as he knocked back another drink. “Why must you be so stubborn?”

The smaller canine puffed out his chest. “I’m not stubborn! I’m determined.”

“Clearly. Just don’t say no one warned you.”

With that, the aged wolf gathered his few belongings and left the tavern. The child did not follow, apparently deciding to wring information from the other patrons. The lupine sighed to himself and shook his head. For the most part, he had been honest. No one else knew exactly what was waiting at the end of that derelict cobblestone strip, and fear of the unknown subdued any urge to find out. He had been the only one foolish enough to explore, and it proved to be a life-altering choice. It was a tale he often reflected on and kept close to his heart, for who would believe him? The wolf had lived it himself and he still thought himself mad for holding it true!

The day he left the sanctity of the village was a day that stood stark against the diluting haze of time. He set himself along that lonely path, daring to reach for its end and bring back something to show for it. As he continued however, the landscape warped and twisted beneath his paws. Hard stone seamlessly flowed into soft carpet, and the trees lining the path knit together to form solid walls. An infinity of doors sprang up on either side of the mysterious hallway, each perfectly identical to the others. Unease and regret replaced bravery and optimism as he walked, which turned into panic when he tried to turn back. The distraught wolf ran for days back the direction he came, but the corridor never again opened back into familiar woods.

He spent decades opening and closing the limitless gateways, occasionally stepping beyond thresholds in search of civilization, but never venturing far enough to lose sight of the entry point. Some of the realms were friendly enough, and he did his best to make a note of their door should worst come to worst, but he longed to find his way back home. He missed the soft face of his mother and the glowing expression of his father, and every trial that bore error was another needle in his heart. Hope gradually wore down with each creaking hinge, and as he approached the noon of his life, he resolved to salvage his fate. After a few more tries, he would settle on the least hostile world and attempt to build a life. And as if the gods had tired of their plaything, he found his destination.

Despite his lengthy exile, the wolf found his bearings quickly and ran to his village as fast as his legs would carry him. To his delight he found that his home was still intact, but he worried of what had happened to his parents in his absence. He let out a yip of joy as his mother greeted him at his favorite door, but his euphoria was short lived. She shrieked as he tried to embrace her, calling his father to cast him out as a stranger. It would be weeks before he would understand their reaction, and though it was perfectly rational, it stung more than everything else he had endured. In one final malicious twist of fate, he had arrived years before his departure. How could this fully grown wolf be their son while his mother still cradled him?

A clap of thunder broke his reflection, motivating him to seek shelter and return to his home. Elizabeth would be waiting for him with a warm smile and pot of hot tea, a thought that brought a smile to his muzzle. All things considered, things turned out rather well.