

The Unknown Path

At the eastern edge of Sereth stood the Scribe's Gate, a two-arched stone passage carved with words so old no living scholar could read what remained of them. Travelers came and went by the left-hand arch — the Known Way. It led to market towns, to family, to safety.

If the right-hand arch had ever had a name, it was lost to the sands of time ages ago.

So people called it the Unchosen Way.

It led somewhere, of course. Every road did. But no one could say where. The few who stepped beneath that arch returned changed or not at all. Most everyone avoided it entirely.

Instead, the right-hand path was simply a part of the landscape, like an old mole on the city's skin — a familiar, unremarkable blemish.

Mirel paused there at midmorning, exhausted. The city bells had just rung the hour, their hollow notes drifting like a stale draft through her heart. She had slept poorly — again. She still kept a second cup on the shelf, though the one to whom it belonged had chosen — elsewhere. Loss collected in the corners of her life like dust. Too many days felt like empty repetitions of happier yesterdays.

She hadn't meant to stop at the Gate. Her errands lay along the left-hand arch, same as always. But she found herself standing still in the sunlit dust, staring at the seam of shadow beneath the right-hand arch.

A farmer pushing a cart called to her, "Wrong way." But she didn't move.

Mirel's breath trembled. Not from fear — she was too tired for fear — but from a pressure she couldn't name, a sense of being on the verge of something small but real, like a bud deciding whether to open. She stepped closer.

The dust around her feet stirred, then settled again.

Her throat tightened. "What the hell," she murmured.

She turned toward the left-hand arch again — but her feet didn't follow. They remained angled toward the unnamed road, as though some silent inner vote had already been cast without her consent.

She took a single step beneath the right-hand arch.

The air shifted. Not dramatically — just enough that she felt it at the edges of her skin, a subtle thinning, a sense of being recognized by something she couldn't see.

Dust rose in a faint swirl behind her. When it settled, she saw them: impressions in the earth beside her footprints. Soft hollows, as though someone else walked beside her with a gait slightly longer than her own.

She froze. Looked back. Called softly, "Is someone there?"

The impressions faded. Only her own prints remained.

Mirel swallowed. Her pulse beat in her ears.

Tentatively, she walked forward again.

With her second step, the companion footprints reappeared — this time clearer, more defined, as though the unseen traveler wished to reassure her: You're not imagining me. I'm here when you walk, not when you look.

She reached down to touch one. Her fingers passed through dust — the imprint dissolving at her touch, then re-forming once she lifted her hand.

A wind picked up. The road stretched forward in a quiet golden line, bending out of sight beyond low hills. Birds called somewhere unseen.

Mirel took another step. The other footprints matched her pace.

Her breath steadied.

She didn't know where the road led. She didn't know what walked beside her. She didn't even know why she'd set foot here today. But she felt, with a clarity gentler than certainty, that her long solitude wasn't her whole truth — and that today, she had finally allowed herself to feel that.

She walked.

Not quickly.

Not bravely.

Not with any grand resolve.

Just enough —
just the next step
and then the next.

Behind her, distant voices called her name. She didn't answer. The wind carried those voices away like old obligations finally allowed to drift into nothing.

The companion prints deepened as the road rose toward the horizon, as if whoever walked beside her was growing more sure-footed with her continuing resolve.

At the crest of the hill, she paused, breathing the clean air. The path ahead glimmered faintly in the afternoon light — not glowing, not magical, just... attentive. As though the world itself leaned forward to listen.

Mirel whispered, not to the road, not to the unseen traveler, but to herself: "I don't know where I'm going. But I've certainly left where I was!"

The wind answered with a luminous silence, brushing her hair behind her shoulders like a gentle hand preparing her for what comes next.

She took another step, and another.

And the distant horizon welcomed her.

— *William Zeitler*
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