

Dearest Alma,

Between questing and sightseeing the impossible, I find little free time to write. I feel a little bad about this, because the post delivery is astoundingly good here. Hardly anyone writes letters, so I've reached a personal agreement with several griffins: They'll deliver a letter anywhere on the continent if I spend an hour braiding flowers in their mane. The griffins here love color and delicate arrangements, but they lack the manual dexterity required for such fine work. And their hair is so soft and thick, it's a pleasant hour for me, too. But this letter's more difficult to deliver, since apparently they don't have provisions for sending letters through doors that are only occasionally and unpredictably portals to different worlds. Go figure.

In any case, there's little use worrying about punctuality, because even if delivery in this world is prompt, there is still the matter of differences in time flow between our worlds. I have, for instance, already received your reply to this letter, and I am glad to hear that all is well and that your quest proceeds apace. I'll not say more than that, since I'm not in the habit of creating temporal paradoxes and I'm not keen to start.

The last time I wrote, I was in search of the fabled Key to the Hidden Lock. In the end, I found the Key in a drawer in the castle's basement; turns out the king from a few centuries ago left it there and forgot about it. Of course, I only discovered that after making my way through the Maze of Memory, the Sea of Solitude, the Forest of Forgetfulness, and so on, and so on. You know the kind: lots of trials and tribulations, personal reflection and revelations, and trenchant metaphors on the human condition. It sure would've saved everyone—and me especially—a lot of trouble if he just jotted down a note. You know, something like: "Off to abdicate, left the mystical key to the gate of our land in drawer 32A. Ta-ta!"

But the good news is that the Hidden Lock was right there next to the Key, not so very hidden after all. Convenient for me, since now instead of heading out immediately on a second quest, I have some time to explore this place and learn about its history. For example, that forgetful king? Last one ever. He found it tedious to be king, and everyone else found it tedious to have a king, so they just stopped with the whole business altogether. Now the castle is a bustling way station and tenement house.

The benefit for me is that the inhabitants never tried to crown me king, as is an unfortunately common habit among offworlds. In any case, my career as an inveterate book addict and amateur quester hardly prepared me to lead a nation. Plus, you know well my stomach's sensitivity: Rich foods, pomp, and ceremony do not agree with it. So really this outcome is altogether agreeable to everyone.

*O-ho! what's this? A knock at the door. Give me a minute . . .*

*A large mushroom has requested, on behalf of the forest folk, my presence at a banquet to greet the offworlder (me) in several weeks' time. A banquet is ostensibly a simple affair: you go, you eat, you return; so in principle I have plenty of time before heading out. But we both know how these things go: I'll surely find a child who needs rescuing along the way, or become embroiled in sylvan politics, or be suddenly transported to the other side of the continent. Best to get a head start.*

*So I'll end this letter here, journey forest-ward tomorrow, and send this by griffin with wishes of safety, contentment, and wonder. Best of luck with the Chalice. Write when you can.*

*Ned*