

Noah Manners

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Meg hadn't heard from Devon in four months, and she realized that she missed him. So on a whim she tossed her sword and scabbard into the back seat of her car and drove over to campus to visit him.

She'd always thought that she and Devon would be one of those couples who really did stay friends afterward. They'd been close for so long, and things hadn't ended that badly. Actually, the whole incident seemed pretty silly to her now. Still, she'd been telling herself that the split had been for the best — with her working full-time and him still an undergrad. It was like they were in two different worlds. She'd been busy with work, and he'd always been careless about answering email, and now somehow four months had passed without a word.

She parked in the shadow of his dorm, then grabbed her sword and strapped it to her jeans. She approached his building. A spider, dog-sized, iridescent, rappelled toward her, its thorned limbs plucking the air. She dropped a hand to the hilt of her sword. The spider wisely withdrew, back to its webbed lair amid the eaves.

She had no keycard, so she waited for someone to open the door. She checked her reflection. Eyes large, hips slender, ears a bit tapered at the tips. She looked fine. (Though she'd never be a match for the imaginary elf-maid Leena.)

Finally someone exited, an unfamiliar brown-haired girl. Meg caught the door and passed into the lobby. She climbed the stairs and walked down the hall to Devon's door. She knocked.

His roommate Brant answered, looking half-asleep or maybe stoned. "Hey Meg," Brant mumbled — casually, as if he'd just seen her yesterday. "How's the real world?"

"Like college," she said, "but with less Art History. Is Devon here?"

"Devon?" Brant seemed confused. "Oh. You don't know." He hesitated. "He dropped out."

"What?" She was startled.

"Just packed up and left. Weeks ago. He said it didn't matter anymore. He was playing that game all the time." Brant didn't need to say *which* game. Least of all to her. "He said he found something, huge. In the game. Then he went away."

"Went away where? Is he all right?"

Brant shrugged. "I don't know, Meg. He didn't tell me. You could email him, I guess. Or try to find him online. He's always playing that game." Brant shook his head. "And I mean *always*."

Meg strode to her car. She chucked her sword in back, slid into the driver's seat, and slammed the door.

Devon was the smartest guy she'd ever met, and the stupidest. How could he drop out with just one year left? Sadly, she wasn't all that surprised.

She'd met him at an off-campus party her junior year. They'd ended up on the same couch. Before long he was on his third beer and telling her, "I didn't even want to go to college. My parents insisted. I had a whole other plan."

She said, "Which was?"

"To be a prince." He gave a grandiose shrug. "I think I'd make a pretty good prince." He noted her skeptical expression, and added, "But not prince of like, England. I'm not greedy. Prince of Monaco would be fine. Wait, is that even a country?"

"Yes," she said.

"Good," he declared, thumping his beer on the endtable. "Prince of Monaco. Or if that's taken ... "

"Liechtenstein," she suggested.

"Liechtenstein, great!" he agreed, pointing. "Or Trinidad and Tobago."

She shook her head. "It's not a monarchy. No princes."

"No princes?" He feigned outrage. "Well, screw *them* then. Liechtenstein it is."

After that she noticed him everywhere. He seldom went to class or did coursework, so he was always out somewhere — joking with friends in the dining hall, pacing around the pond, or sitting under a tree in the central quad, doodling. His carefree independence was oddly endearing, especially to her who was always so conscientious, though later his indifference to school worried her. She'd ask, "What'll you do after you graduate?"

He'd just shrug and say, "Grades don't matter. Just that you have the degree."

And now he'd dropped out.

Angry, she started her car. She drove back to her apartment.

She emailed him repeatedly, but got no response. Mutual friends hadn't heard from him. His mom thought he was still in school. Meg got really worried. Finally, she resorted to something she'd promised herself she'd never do — she drove over to the mall to buy the game.

It was called *Realms of Eldritch*, a groundbreaking multiplayer online game full of quests and wizards and monsters. Some of the game was based on real life: People carried magic swords, and many of the enemies were real, such as wolves or goblins or giant spiders. And like in real life there was a gnome who sometimes appeared to give you quests or hints or items. But most of it was pure fantasy: dragons and unicorns and walking trees and demon lords.

And elves. In the game store, Meg eyed the box art. Leena, the golden-haired and impossibly buxom elf-maid, grinned teasingly.

Meg had a complicated relationship with Leena (especially considering that Leena wasn't real). The year before, Meg had been riffling through Devon's notebook and had come across a dozen sketches of Leena. The proportions were off, but each sketch came closer and closer to being a perfect representation. Meg had begun teasing Devon that he was in love with Leena.

Meg had also once, foolishly, dressed up as Leena in bed, for Devon's twenty-first birthday. It was just a campy gag, but he'd seemed way too into it. He'd even called her "Leena." She'd never worn the costume again, and he'd never brought it up. He'd been pretty drunk that night, and she'd wondered if he even remembered her looking like someone else.

She bought the game (planning to return it the next day) and started home. In the rearview mirror she saw a flock of giant bats tailing her. She tensed, ready to slam the brakes and reach for her sword, but finally the bats veered off and vanished into the west.

Back at her apartment, she opened the game box and dumped its contents out on her coffee table. Half a dozen CDs, a thick manual, some flyers, a questionnaire. It seemed so innocuous. Hard to believe that this little box could destroy a relationship. She and Devon had been so happy together for almost a year before he got caught up in this game.

She installed it. As progress bars chugged, she thumbed through the manual, which described the rules in mind-numbing detail — races, classes, attributes, combat, inventory, spells. She'd never understood how someone as smart and talented as Devon could waste so much time on this stuff.

Maybe she could have understood if the game at least featured some brilliant story, but Devon spent all his time doing "level runs" — endlessly repeating the same quest over and over in hopes of attaining some marginally more powerful magical item. And even after he'd become as powerful as the game allowed, he still kept playing, exploiting different bugs so that he could duplicate superpowered items or make himself invincible. How could someone who read Heidegger for fun so immerse himself in a subculture of people too lazy or daft to type out actual words, who instead of "Someone please help" would type "sum1 plz hlp"?

Meg, on the rare occasions that she permitted herself solitary recreation, preferred Jane Austen novels or independent films. She'd once told Devon, "I'm more interested in things that are *real*."

He'd been playing the game. Monitor-glow made his head a silhouette. He said, "What's *real* is just an accident. No one designed reality to be compelling." He gestured to the screen. "But a fantasy world *is* so designed. It takes the most interesting things that ever existed — like knights in armor and pirates on the high seas — and combines them with the most interesting things that anyone ever dreamed up — fire-breathing dragons and blood-drinking vampires. It's the world as it *should* be, full of wonder and adventure. To privilege reality simply because it *is* reality just represents a kind of mental parochialism."

She knew better than to debate him. But she still thought the game was vaguely silly, and she refused to play it, though he often bugged her to join in. He'd say, "It's something we could do together."

And she'd answer, "I just don't want to."

And he'd say, "Give it a try. I do things / don't want to because they're important to you. Sometimes I even end up liking them."

But by then Meg had already spent far too many hours sitting on the couch watching him play the game, or hearing about it over candlelit dinners, and she didn't intend to do anything to justify him spending any more time on it.

It was hard some nights, after they'd made love, to lie there knowing that he was just itching to slip from her embrace and go back to the game. To know that a glowing electronic box full of imaginary carnage beckoned him in a way that her company and conversation and even body no longer could.

Finally, she couldn't take it anymore. Though she knew she might lose him, she announced, "Devon. Look. I don't know how else to say this. It's that game or me. I'm not kidding."

He released the controls and swiveled in his chair. He gave her a wounded look and said, "That's not fair, Meg. I'd never make you give up something you enjoyed."

She stood her ground. "This is something I'm asking you to do. For me."

"You really want me to delete it?"

"Yes," she said. Oh god, yes.

He bit his lip, then said, "Fine." He fiddled with the computer, then turned to her and added, "There, it's gone. All right?"

"All right," she said, euphoric. And for a few weeks things were great again, like they used to be.

But one night she came over and found him playing it again. She stared. "What are you doing?"

He glanced at her and said, "Oh, hi." He noticed her agitation, and explained, "My guild really needed me for this one quest."

"You told me you deleted it."

He turned back to the screen. "Yeah, I had to reinstall the whole thing. Don't worry, I'll delete it again tomorrow."

Meg was furious. "You *promised*."

"Come on," he said, "I haven't played for *three weeks*. It's just this one time."

She stomped away. "I told you, Devon. That game or me. Isn't that what I said?"

"Meg, don't leave, okay? Would you just — " Something happened in the game, and he

jumped. "Shit! He got me."

She left, slamming the door. Devon called out, "Meg, wait." But he didn't run after her.

She expected him to call and apologize, beg her forgiveness, but he didn't. Days passed, then she sent him a curt email saying that maybe it would be better if they just stayed friends from now on, and — disappointingly — he had agreed.

The game finished installing. Meg hovered the mouse pointer over the start icon. She felt strangely ambivalent. She'd fought so hard against this damn game, and now she was actually going to run it. She also felt an inexplicable dread, as if the game would suck her in the way it had sucked in Devon, and she'd never escape. But that was silly. She was just using it to contact him. She double-clicked.

The game menu loaded. She created a character and chose all the most basic options — human, female, warrior. The name Meg was taken, so she added a random string of numbers, Meg1274, and logged in. The game displayed a list of servers. Meg did a search for his character, Prince Devonar. He was the only player listed on a server named Citadel of Power. She connected to it.

She typed, "Hi Devon." No response.

She tried again. "Devon? It's me, Meg. Are you there?"

Finally, he answered. "Meg?"

She typed, "Are you OK?"

A long pause. "I found something. In the game. Unbelievable. But now I'm stuck. Need help."

Was this whole situation some elaborate setup to get her to play the game with him? But that was crazy. Not even Devon would drop out of school as part of such a ruse. She typed, "Devon, call me. OK?"

Another pause. "Can't call. Trapped. Plz, Meg, help me. You're the only one who can."

"I can't help," she typed. "I'm only level 1."

"Not in the game," he typed back. "In real life. Ask the gnome. Plz, Meg. I really need you. Can't stay. Meg, save me plz."

She typed frantically. "Devon, wait. What's going on? Where are you???"

But Prince Devonar was gone.

Devon had said to ask the gnome. But that wasn't so easy.

No one really understood what the gnome was. He seemed to wander through time and space. He was usually benevolent, appearing to those in need and offering hints or assistance or powerful items. But he was also fickle and enigmatic. He seemed to only appear after you'd given up hope of finding him. He also seemed to prefer locales with corners that he could pop out from and then disappear around.

So Meg parked downtown and wandered the back alleys. She couldn't stop thinking of Devon's final words: "Save me plz." If only the gnome would show himself. Hours passed.

Forget it. She was going home. She crossed the street —

And then the gnome, before her.

Crimson-robed, white-bearded, flesh like dry sand. One eye brown, kindly. The other blue, inscrutable. In a soft and alien voice he observed, "On a quest."

Finally. She wanted to grab him. "Where's Devon? Tell me."

"This is your path." The gnome pointed to the road at her feet, then westward.

Meg nodded. "I'll follow it."

The gnome turned his kindly brown eye upon her. "Have no fear, though obstacles lie in your way. Your victory is assured, foretold by prophecy: 'When the warrior-maid with love in her heart sets out, sword in her right hand, wand in her left, nothing shall stand before her.'"

"Wand?" she said.

The gnome reached up his sleeve and drew forth a thin black rod, two feet long. He whispered, "The most dire artifact in all the world, the Wand of Reification." He handed it to her. It chilled her fingers, and was so dark that it seemed to have no surface. He said, "Imbued with the power to give form to dreams. It may only be used three times."

Devon had said once that in the game there were items that vanished after you used them. So he never used them. He'd beat quest after quest without them, though they would've aided him considerably. He was always afraid he'd need them later. He'd asked, "What does that say about me?" and she'd said, "You're afraid of commitment?" and he'd laughed. It wasn't so funny now though, as she clutched this wand, so potent yet so ephemeral. How could she ever use it?

When she looked again, the gnome had vanished.

Meg retrieved her car and set off the way the gnome had pointed. The road: a double yellow line and two lanes of black asphalt, bordered by sidewalks. She drove. Skyscrapers and then suburbs fell away behind her. She passed clusters of thatched-roof cottages. Men farmed and cows grazed and windmills turned. Sometimes ancient oaks pressed in close to the road. Sometimes she saw castles on distant hills.

The needle on her gas gauge sank, and she hoped to find a station, but there were none. Finally, the engine died. She left her car and set off down the sidewalk.

Twilight came. Then the long line of streetlamps lit up, casting eerie white splotches on the darkened street, creating a tableau somehow dreamlike and unreal. She thought of how Devon and Brant would sometimes smoke pot and then get into long, rambling discourses on the nature of existence. During one such conversation, Devon had said, "Do you know anything about quantum mechanics?"

"Not really," Brant had replied.

So Devon said, "Well, in the everyday world, things exist. If I leave a book on this table, I know for sure that it's there. But when you get down to the subatomic level, things don't exist in the same way. They only exist as *probabilities*, until directly observed. How do you explain that?"

Brant countered, "How do *you* explain it?"

Devon smirked. "Like this: Our world isn't real. It's a *simulation*. An incredibly sophisticated one, but not without limits. It can keep track of every molecule, but not every last subatomic particle. So it estimates, and only starts figuring out where specific particles are when someone goes looking for them."

"That's so weird," Brant said.

Meg heard a vehicle approaching from behind. Then its headlights lit the street. She glanced back into the glare, then kept walking. The vehicle slowed. It followed, in a way she didn't like. Finally, it pulled even with her. A black SUV, its windows open. From the darkness came a rasping, lascivious voice, "Hey, where you going?"

She ignored it, walked.

"Need a ride?" The voice waited. "Hey, I'm talking to you." A long pause. "What, you too good to talk to us?" When Meg didn't answer, the voice hissed, "Bitch," and the driver gunned the engine. The truck sped off.

Meg watched it go, then watched its taillights flare a sudden red challenge, watched it swing around, its headlights sweeping the trees, watched it come on, two coronas of searing white. Cackles rose from its windows. Meg drew her sword and stepped into the street. The car horn shrieked.

She slashed upward, between the lights, and the truck split. Its two halves swept past on either side. Its right half sped into a tree. Its left half flipped over and rolled thirty yards along the pavement.

Meg followed after. She neared the wreckage. A scraggly vermillion arm reached up through one window, then a face appeared — hairless, dark-eyed, ears like rotting carrots. A goblin. He squirmed free and dropped to the ground. A second goblin crawled from beneath the wreck.

The first drew a long wavy dagger. "Look what you did to my truck!"

But before he could start forward, the second grabbed him and leaned in close. "It's *her*. The Facilitator."

The first goblin studied Meg, and his eyes widened. He sheathed his dagger. "So it is." He touched two knuckles to his gnarled red brow. "I apologize, my lady. We owe you much."

The goblins edged around her, then hurried over to the other half of their vehicle. They dragged out two more goblins, who were seriously injured, and departed together.

And then they were gone. But their words stayed with Meg, and perplexed her, and troubled her greatly.

She had other adventures, vanquished other foes, and the road led ever on. Finally, she came to the peak of a rocky prominence and looked out over a mile-long crater. The street ran downhill until it reached the gates of a dark and forbidding fortress. She knew that this must be the Citadel of Power and that Devon must be within. She hiked down to it.

The drawbridge had been lowered. She eased across, sword in her right hand, Wand of Reification in her left. The portcullis was up and the gate lay open. She slipped into the yard.

Empty. She crept sideways, keeping the wall at her back. She held her breath, heard nothing.

She peeked into the central yard and saw a grand stone altar. She crept closer. An object lay upon it. A wand.

The Wand of Reification.

She glanced at her left hand, which still held *her* wand. She'd thought it unique. She already had a Wand of Reification, and hadn't even used it. She shrugged, took the second wand and tucked it in her belt, then moved on.

She searched bedchambers, kitchens, a great hall, a cavernous ballroom, all empty. She entered an ancient armory. Crossbows, shields, pikes —

Wands.

Rack after rack of wands. Hundreds of wands. A thousand? Wands of Reification all, she felt sure. She didn't understand.

She went outside and crossed the yard again. The sky had begun to dim, and now she saw faint light in a tower window. She ran toward it.

Which hall? Which way? She dashed through rooms and under arches and up spiral stairs. Finally she found it — a door, shut, wan light spilling from beneath. She hurled herself against the door, and burst into the room with her sword raised.

A bedchamber. Posters on the walls. Devon's posters, from his old dorm room.

Light from a computer monitor. Someone sat before it. He turned. Devon.

He smiled and said, "Meg. Hey!"

She ran to him, enfolded him in her arms along with sword and wand and everything, and said, "Are you all right? I was so worried."

"I'm fine." He squeezed her and chuckled. "Everything's fine." He pulled back, brushed aside a lock of her hair, and kissed her. He was so tall and handsome, tawny-haired and emerald-eyed. He wore a gold medallion over a purple doublet with dagged sleeves. "Come on. You're exhausted." He led her to the bed, and they sat down together. He took her sword and wand and laid them on the nightstand.

She rested her cheek against his shoulder. She stared at the familiar posters (the nearest was an Edmund Leighton print) and whispered, "Aren't you in trouble? I thought you were. Devon, I don't understand what's happening."

"Shhh." He stroked her hair. "Just relax, okay? I'll explain everything."

He said that the real world was just a simulation, like a game. He didn't know who'd made it, but whoever they were they didn't seem to show themselves or ever interfere. Like any game, it had bugs. Many of these involved *Realms of Eldritch*, which was itself a new, fairly sophisticated simulation, and sometimes things got confused, and an item from the game got dumped into the real world. That's how he'd gotten the Wand of Reification, which could be used to alter almost anything. With it he'd set things in motion. He said, "Do you understand so far?"

She nodded, tentatively. It was all so strange.

He said that since the wand could only be used three times, he'd had to go looking for another bug, some way to duplicate the wand. Fortunately, there *was* one. But it was very specific: If a female warrior set out to rescue a man she loved, and was given the wand by the gnome, the game set a quest tag wrong, and let her acquire the wand again at the Citadel of Power, leaving her with two. Devon said, "Ah, speak of the devil." Meg raised her head.

The gnome, his head canted so that his mysterious blue eye watched her. Devon reached toward the nightstand, took the wand, and handed it to the gnome.

Meg murmured, "Why are you giving it to him?"

Devon said, "So he can give it to you again."

The gnome stuck the wand in his sleeve, gave a curt nod, and hobbled from the room.

Meg was mystified. "You said this bug creates an extra wand?"

"Yes."

She thought of the armory. "But you have *hundreds* of wands."

"Over a thousand," Devon said. He took the spare wand from her belt and placed it on the bed. "One for each time you've come here. One thousand two hundred and seventy four wands."

She was stunned. "But ... I don't remember ..."

He told her, somewhat cryptically, "When you restart a quest, you lose all your progress."

Meg stood, pulling from his embrace. "Devon, you *lied* to me. You said you were trapped here."

He stood too. "I'm sorry. I had to. You had to be on a quest to save me, otherwise it wouldn't work."

She fumed. "I was in danger. I was attacked!"

He held back a smile. "And what happened?"

"I ... " She hesitated. "I beat them."

"Of course. Meg, you're level 60. You have the most powerful sword in the game. Nothing can harm you. There was never any danger. Didn't you get my prophecy?"

"*Your* prophecy?"

"That's why I wrote it," he said. "That's why I made the gnome recite it. So you wouldn't be afraid."

She paced to the window and looked out. This was all too much. "So now you've got a thousand wands. Why? What are you planning to do?"

He came and put his arm around her, and said softly, "To remake the world. To make it what it should have been all along — a place of wonder and adventure, without old age or disease. A place where death is only temporary — like in the game."

"You're going to make the game real," she said.

"Yes."

She felt apprehension. "I don't know, Devon. Maybe you shouldn't be messing around with this. I like the world just fine the way it is."

"Meg." His tone was affectionate. "You always say that."

She felt a sudden alarm. "What?"

Again, he suppressed a smile. "It's already begun. Ages ago. You think the world always had goblins and giant spiders and a gnome running around handing out magic items? That's all from the game. *I* made that happen."

She felt adrift. "I ... don't remember."

"No one does," he said. "The wand makes things real. Not just physical, but *real*. Only *I* know that things used to be different, and now so do you."

And the goblins, Meg thought. They knew.

Devon kept going. "That's what's so funny, Meg. No matter what I do, no matter what crazy, incongruous reality I create, you always want things to stay exactly the way they are. That's just your personality. But we can't stop now. There's still so much to do. And you'll love it when I'm done, you'll see. You have to trust me."

"I don't know," she said. "I ... need to think about it."

"Of course," Devon replied. "Take all the time you need."

So she stayed with Devon at the Citadel of Power, and they ate meals together in the dining hall, and danced together in the grand ballroom, and after that first night they slept together again too. She was still in love with him. She always had been. Even the game knew it.

They hiked together around the crater's rim, and he told her of the world as it *had* been, when there'd been no magic at all, and humans were the only race that could speak, and

adventure was something that most people only dreamt of. It sounded dismal, and yet Meg wondered, "Could you reverse the process? Put everything back the way it was?"

Devon was silent a while. "It would take a long time. But yes, I could. Is that what you want?"

"I don't know," she said.

That night, Devon told her, "I want to show you something." He led her to their tower chamber and turned on his computer. Meg was suddenly nervous. The monitor flickered. Icons appeared. Devon said softly, "Look at my background."

It showed two students sitting on a couch at a party. Meg didn't know them. The girl was pear-shaped and frizzy-haired and wore thick glasses. The guy wore glasses too, and was gangly, with thin lank hair and blotchy skin. The two of them looked happy together, in a pathetic sort of way. Meg said, "Who are they?"

Devon said, "That's the night we met."

Meg was horrified. She looked again, and suddenly she *did* recognize traces of themselves in the features of those strangers on the couch.

Devon explained, "I used the wand on us. Nothing drastic. I could do a lot more. I could make us anything we want. But you need to understand, Meg, when you talk about putting things back the way they were, exactly what you're saying."

Meg could accept the way she looked now — merely a pale shadow of Leena. But to think that she might not even be pretty, might be *that* girl ...

"I thought you should know," Devon said, apologetic.

The next day at lunch, Meg asked him, "What is it you want me to do?"

He lowered his utensils. "Start the quest over."

"How?"

He nodded in the direction of the tower. "On my computer. I can show you."

"So that you'll get another wand?" she said.

"Yes."

"And I won't remember any of this?"

"No," he said.

She leaned back in her seat. "How many more times, Devon? My god, how many more wands?"

"As many as it takes," he said, without equivocation.

She stood up from the table, and said, "I need to think. Alone." He nodded. She went and paced the castle walls.

Devon wanted his new world more than anything. If she went along, then together they could have immortality and adventure and opulence and wonder. What had the old world offered? Crappy jobs and student loans, illness and death. What kind of a choice was that? She'd been here before, even if she didn't remember, and had sided with Devon one thousand two hundred and seventy four times. Who was she now, to doubt the wisdom of all her past choices?

He was still sitting there when she returned and said, "Fine. Show me."

He led her to the tower and loaded the game. He selected a character named Meg, who looked exactly like her. The character was level 60, and carried a Sword of Ultimate Cleaving +100. Devon clicked through a few menus, then stood. "Okay, *you* have to do it."

Meg sat down at the computer. A box on the screen said: "Citadel of Power — Are you sure you want to start this quest over from the beginning?" The mouse pointer hovered over "Yes."

Devon leaned down next to her. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," she whispered.

He kissed her cheek. "I'll see you again soon, okay?"

"Okay," she said, and clicked.

Meg hadn't heard from Devon in four months, and she realized that she missed him. So on a whim she tossed her sword and scabbard into the back seat of her car and drove over to campus to visit him.

Ages passed.

And now Leena the elf-maid is the most beautiful woman in all the world, and her lover is the most handsome man, Prince Devonar. They journey onward together, battling giants, riding dragons to distant lands, and feasting in the halls of dwarven kings. The prince is incandescent with joy. He was born for this, and Leena enjoys seeing him so happy. She loves him.

They ride two white unicorns down a forest path blanketed with fresh snow, and by some strange twist of magic or fate they come upon something that should not exist.

It lies half-buried in the drifts, but Leena can see that it was once a sort of carriage made from black metal. It has a roof, and its underside is all manner of piping, rusted now. Long ago, someone had sliced it in half. Where its other half may now lie, none can say.

The prince leaps from his mount and circles the strange object. "What foul contraption is this?"

Leena drops to the ground too, and staggers forward. A strange feeling passes over her, and a teardrop streaks her cheek. She can't say why. Soon she is sobbing.

The prince takes her in his arms. "My lady, what's the matter?" He scowls at the object. "It's upset you. Here, it shan't trouble us any longer." He pulls the Wand of Reification from his belt and aims.

"No!" She pushes his arm aside. "Leave it! Please."

He shrugs. "As you wish. But come, let's away. I dislike this place." He mounts his unicorn.

Leena stares at the strange carriage, and for a moment she remembers a world where countless such things raced down endless black roads. A world of soaring glass towers, of medallions that spoke in the voices of friends a thousand leagues distant, and where tales were told with light thrown up on walls the size of giants. Film, she remembers. Independent film. Jane Austen.

But the moment passes, and that fantastic world fades, leaving only the present, leaving only this odd, lingering sensation of being trapped in someone else's dream. She mounts her unicorn, and three words stick in her head, an incantation from a forgotten age. She no longer remembers where she heard the words, only that they now seem to express a feeling that surges up from somewhere deep inside her.

Save me plz.