

Chapter 23

Dark and Stormy

IT WAS A DARK AND STORMY NIGHT. Lord Withens rode through the gloom, which is how things usually are, in situations where it is dark and stormy. Maybe except for summer in Trondheim.

Darkness and storminess are an important part of this story. As he rode through the darkness, Lord Withens thought to himself, “My, this night is very stormy.”

But the darkness and storminess would be just the beginning of his troubles. His destination was the castle of Lady Withens, who was rather pleasant, but a book like this needs trouble somewhere along the line, eh? It also needs a car chase near the ending, if the author has any hopes of this becoming a major motion picture. Don’t worry, the car chase comes later.

At this point it must be noted that Lord Withens was married to Lady Withens, and Lady Withens was married to Lord Withens. But they were not the same lords and ladies. You see, Withenshire was a rather remote area, where over the course of centuries everyone was everyone else’s relative, to a greater or lesser degree, most of them were named Withens, and most of them were lords or ladies. So, if you have been following closely, by now you

realize that this particular lord was cheating on his lady, and this particular lady was cheating on her lord.

Without that kind of complication, we wouldn't have much of a story, now would we? At any rate, all the lords and ladies drove very expensive sports cars, so we can look forward to one heck of a chase scene.

Also, the Withenshire pronunciation of "TeX" rhymes with "sex," which is necessary for best-selling books these days. So if you stick around to chapter forty-two, there will be plenty of it. Between now and then, our story will be limited to gratuitous violence, which is necessary for the movie. And if you wondered why this text has forty-two instead of 42, it is only a matter of custom. Even the Withens know how to read numbers. Well, most of them do.

"Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou, Romeo?" cried Lady Withens.

She was drunk, of course. Almost everyone in Withensire was drunk, most of the time. Don't worry, they will all be sober for the car chase scene. Wouldn't want to set a bad example for young readers, or viewers, now would we?

"My name is not Romeo," replied Lord Withens.

Actually, there was a Romeo Withens somewhere in the vicinity. He was not the husband of this Lady, either. But this Lord did not know that. He did not know much of anything. He was, to put this delicately, a bit short of apps on his smartphone.

If you are anxious to flip ahead to the naughty stuff, and wonder why there are forty-one awful chapters before it, calm down. There is a lot of money to be made in animation. Some of the chapters will feature talking rodents and flying donkeys. You were young once, weren't you? And you watched cartoons, didn't you? So there! Besides, hardly anyone reads much, nowadays. And cartoons have been violent for decades, so that is not a problem.

"Yea, verily, I am losing patience with all this purple prose," screamed Lady Withens. "Is there no good writer to be found anywhere in this shire? Or am I condemned to reading filler material that has no chance of ever

becoming the plot of a major motion picture? Or, as a last resort, must I flip through five hundred cable channels?”

Suddenly, there was a flash of lightning, and a roll of thunder, which often accompanies lightning, especially when the night is dark and stormy. Written in the clouds was this dire message:

__*ctbulbu_ftbagn*

Owls screeched, horses whinnied, and whatever other sound effects are needed. Lord Withens trembled in fear. He knew that the message in the clouds was written in *expl3* syntax. But after a few moments, he calmed down. Earlier that day, an itinerant preacher had told him to beware the handwriting on the wall. But this was in the clouds, so that was all right.

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