

*The Wreck & Rise
of Whitson Mariner*

Also by S. D. Smith
Reformation Lightning

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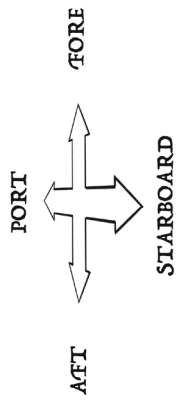
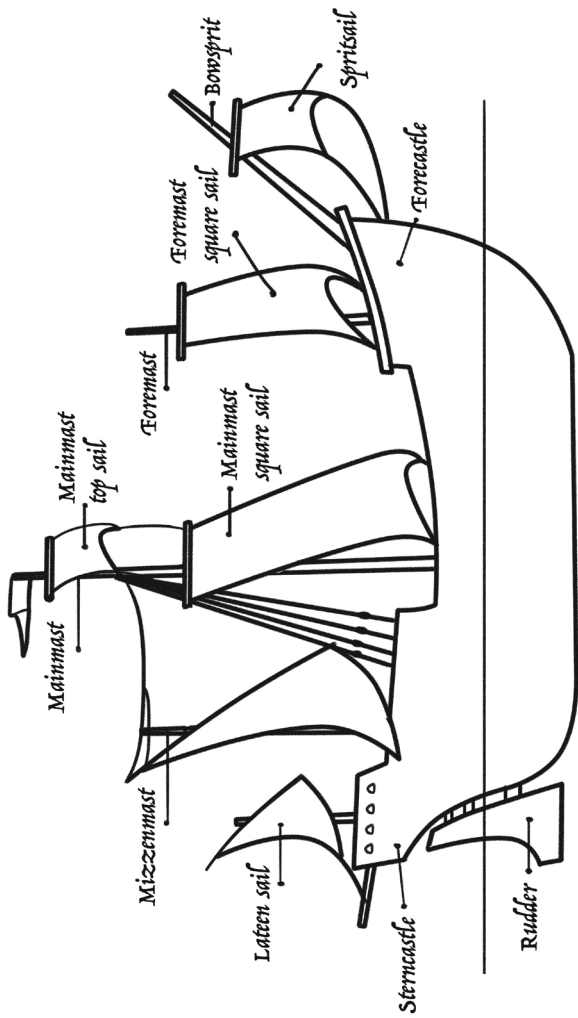
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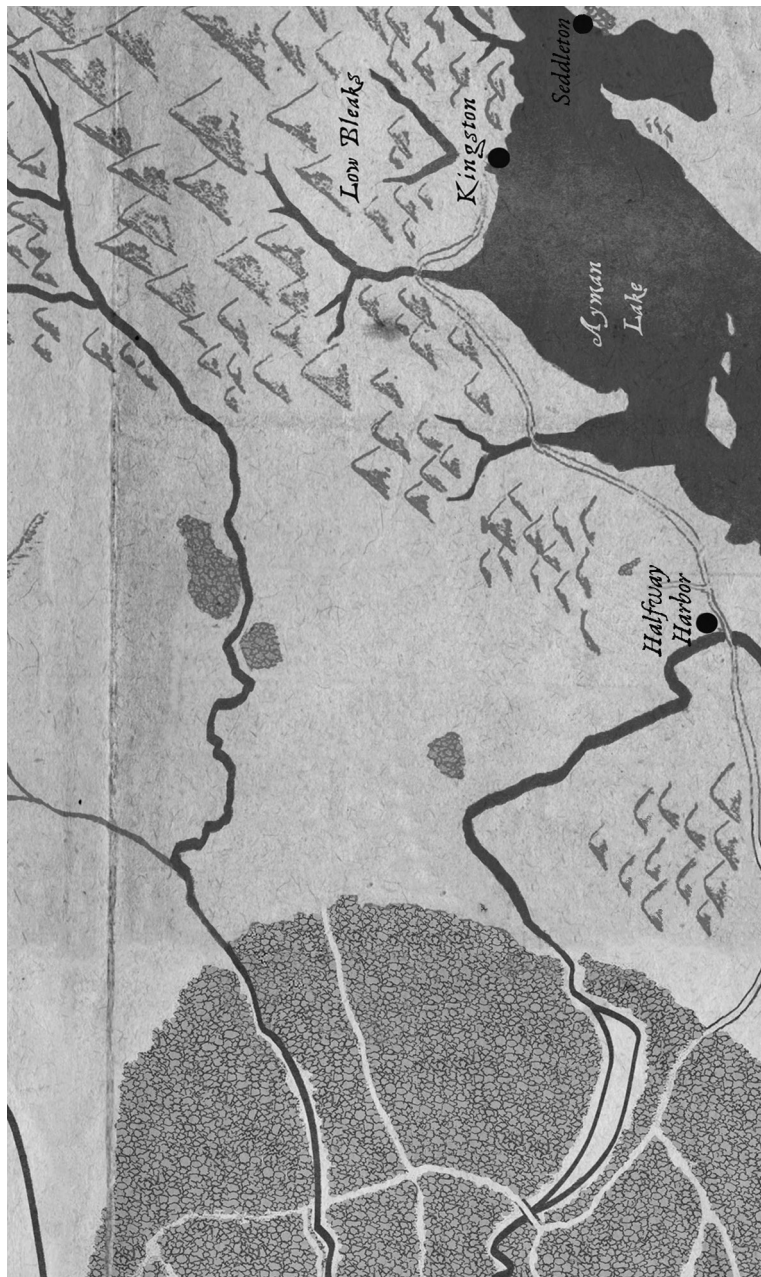
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S. D. SMITH



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Chapter One

King Whitson Mariner received his lords and captains in *Vanguard's* large cabin, along with a few more guests. It was crowded and warm for the gathered rabbits, but the food was good, the mood high, and Queen Lillie was a magnificent hostess.

Whitson gazed across the table at Lillie, who bravely engaged the most boorish lord at the table in conversation. She had done it all evening, kindly including the most reluctant and rude while seeing that the least assertive were also given attention. In the lumpy, ill-formed blob of dough that was this meal, she was the rolling pin, smoothing all and helping it become something of worth. Whitson marvelled at his wife.

Lillie looked so lovely this evening and fairly glowed in the flickering lamplight. She glanced across and caught his eye for the merest moment, her head inclined ever so slightly to his left. Following her subtle direction, he saw Brindle Cove, sitting with his head down, nervously folding and unfolding his hands. Red-furred Brindle was the son of a poor farmer and planned to follow his father's calling. But during the voyage from Golden Coast he had taken to the sea at once. Recently, because of his excellent seamanship, he had been promoted to the rank of lieutenant. Brindle had never been at such a function and clearly felt woefully out of place. The wide-eyed rabbit seemed ready to dart out of the room at any moment.

"Lieutenant Cove," Whitson said cheerfully, "a glass with you, sir?"

"Uh, um." Brindle Cove looked up, stuttering. Recovering himself, he bowed his head. "Your Majesty is very kind." He raised his glass, and they drank together.

"May I congratulate you again on your promotion, Lieutenant?" King Whitson said, leaning closer. "And if you and your parents would do me the honour, I would be grateful if

you would be my guests for dinner in our cabin tomorrow night.”

“Your Majesty,” Cove said, his mouth falling open. “It would be our great pleasure.”

“You would honour me, sir,” Whitson said, smiling. Then he whispered confidentially to the young lieutenant, “It will be less stuffy than this.” Cove breathed a sigh of relief. He bowed his head respectfully, then raised it to show a bright smile and shining eyes. Whitson turned to the other side of the table. “Captain Suttfin, sir. The bottle stands by you.” Captain Suttfin smiled and poured a glass, while Whitson stole a grateful glance at Lillie.

“If only Captain Suttfin dominated the seas as skilfully as he dominates the bottle,” Captain Grimble said. “He’s a better sipper than a skipper.”

Several bucks in Grimble’s corner laughed. Captain Grimble’s father, Lord Grimble, leaned against the wall, appraising the room with narrowed eyes.

Whitson frowned. He had been afraid of this. Before he could interject, Captain Suttfin answered. “Skill alone is no measure of virtue.”

“No, indeed,” Captain Grumble replied. “But there are no fortunes to be made by playing well with others and having the best manners.”

“If there were, you’d be a pauper, Grumble,” Commander Tagg said.

“He’s the best captain here,” Commander Usher called, casting a sideways glance at King Whitson, “and no one can argue with that. He’d out-sail and out-fight any rabbit alive.”



“Surely we’ll make our fortunes together—sail on together, fight together—serving our king,” Captain Walters said, looking into Captain Grumble’s haughty face. “Will we not?”

Grumble smirked but said nothing. An agonizing silence followed as Whitson searched for the right words to calm this brewing storm.

“I will serve the king . . . a drink”—Lillie swept into the centre of the room—“and one for you

as well, Captain Grimble,” she added, handing a glass to each buck. A third glass appeared, which she took, extending it towards the corner of the room. “Lord Grimble, will you not have a drink with the king and your son?”

“My son . . . the king? Only,” the old lord said, walking forwards with a knowing smile, “if the queen will join us.”

“I would be delighted to join you,” Lillie said.

“To a true queen,” Captain Grimble said, raising his glass before Whitson could, as was his proper place, raise a toast of his own. “May her beauty be the light by which a new and distinct kingdom dawns.”

“To the beautiful queen,” Lord Grimble said, with a wry smile at his son, “and a new kingdom.”

Whitson’s anger rose, but before he could speak, Lillie took his arm and led him away. They passed Lord Grant, who had been close enough to see the encounter. Lord Grant glared at Lord Grimble.

“Where are we going?” Whitson whispered, arm stiff as they moved to the other side of the room.

“A tactical retreat, for now,” Lillie whispered back, smiling. “We’ll fight on other fronts, my love.”

“I suppose I should thank you,” Whitson said.

“I am always with you, husband,” she answered, locking eyes with him.

“I know it, Lillie. What would I ever do without you?”

She fixed the chain around his neck from which swung a ruby gem and smiled up at him. “Wreck and ruin?” she whispered back.

“Most likely so,” he said, glancing around. “Lillie, when can I end this, do you think? If we cut it off before there’s a fight, we’ll call that a major diplomatic victory.”

“Probably an hour or so, my dear,” she said. “But now would be a good time to toast them all.”

He nodded, and they turned to face their guests. “Friends,” Whitson called, quieting the lively table, “may I propose a toast?”

“Hear him!” Lord Grant called, looking straight at Lord Grimble. “Hear our one true king!”

The king nodded to the noble old rabbit and put his arm around Lillie. “All of us stuck

together during the passage from Golden Coast, through the Battle of Ayman Lake, and through the wintering we've just endured at Halfway Harbor. For that, I salute you." Many of the guests began to tip back their glasses, but the king went on. "Now, shipmates, we set off on what I hope is the final stage of our journey."

"Hear, hear!" Captain Walters called.

"May it be," Lieutenant Cove said brightly.

"So, gentlerabbits all, let us drink," Whitson said, raising his glass high, "to our journey—the journey to our unknown home."

They drank together, clapped, and cheered the king. On the deck above them the deckhands cheerfully danced and sang. Though Lillie had worked her magic and the evening was a plain success, the Grimble still brooded near the edge of the room. But even they joined in when the gathered rabbits sang.

*"We have sailed over endless seas,
That have somehow now come to an end.
And we, having settled at home,
Have decided to sail out again.
Oh, what has got into our minds,
That we give up the life we had?"*

*It only can be that we've caught the disease,
Of the seas and we've all gone mad!
So, hie, and so, hey, we're sailing away,
On the tide, with a bride like a dream!
In her bosom we fly, under glorious skies,
We are wed to the ship of the seas.*

*We are bred for the ship of the seas.
We'll be dead on this ship of the seas.
What ya' said on this ship of the seas?
Said, 'We'll be dead, on the ship of the seas!'"*

They sang on and on and had many more toasts before Whitson bade them farewell.

"My friends, I do not like to be the one to say it, but here is where we part. Captain Grimble and Commander Usher return to *Burnley*, and Captain Suttfin and Commander Baghurst to *Steadfast*. We are three ships, but one community. May our three vessels carry us safely on our passage home."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Suttfin said, bowing low.

Captain Grimble, uneasy for a moment, stepped forwards and bowed slightly without making eye contact. "Safe travels, sir."

“Captain Walters, please see that our guests have everything they need,” Whitson said.

“Aye, sir,” Walters answered, crossing to confer with his fellow captains. “Lieutenant Massie,” he called, “please step on deck and alert the boat crews that their captains will be leaving soon.”

“Aye, sir,” Massie said. With a neat bow, he turned and left the cabin.

Lillie came alongside Whitson, sliding her arm into his. “My king, you did it.”

“My queen,” he replied, gazing at Captain Grimble’s foul expression, “what have I done?”

“I have a feeling ...” Lillie began brightly, but then she winced, and finally she sighed.

“Me too,” Whitson replied. “A very, very bad one.”