

In the Navy

David Weber

"I'm telling you, Mike, we can do this!"

Mike Stearns inhaled deeply, counted to ten—*no, better make it twenty*—and reminded himself that the President of the United States couldn't go around throttling overenthusiastic teenagers. He told himself that rather firmly, then reopened his eyes.

"Eddie," he asked as patiently as possible, "do you have any idea how many people walk through this office every week—every day, for that matter—with projects that absolutely, positively just have to be done Right This Minute?"

"But this is *different*, Mike!" The wiry, red-haired young man on the other side of Mike's desk waved his hands. "This is *important!*"

"That's exactly my point, Eddie. They're *all* important. But important or not, we only have so many up-timers with the sorts of skills to make them work. And this—" Mike thumped a solid, muscular palm on the lovingly executed sketch plan Eddie had laid on his desk between two tall piles of books—"would require skills I doubt any of us have to begin with. Besides, can you even imagine how someone like Quentin Underwood would react if I handed whole miles of railroad track over to you for a 'crackpot scheme' like this?"

"It's not a 'crackpot scheme!'" Eddie said hotly. "This is exactly how the Confederates built their original ironclads, with rolled railroad rails for armor back during the Civil War."

"No, it's not," Mike replied patiently. "It's how you *think* they built them, and that's—"

"It *is* how they built them!" Eddie interrupted. "My research is solid, Mike!"

"If you'll let me finish?" Mike's voice was noticeably cooler, and Eddie blushed with the fiery color only a natural redhead could produce.

"Sorry," he muttered, and Mike was hard pressed not to chuckle at his expression. Eddie Cantrell, especially in the grip of one of his effervescent enthusiasms, was prone to forget that the Mike Stearns he'd known all his life had become President of the only United States that existed in this Year of Our Lord Sixteen Hundred and Thirty-Two. Which was fair enough, Mike supposed. There'd been enough times over the last year or so that *he'd* thought he was living in a fever dream instead of reality.

"As I was saying," he continued after a moment, "I don't have any doubt at all that this plan of yours," he thumped the sketch on his desk again, "represents one hell of a lot of research and hard thinking. But the truth is that you don't have any better idea than I do of what sorts of hardware it would take to build the thing. Or, for that matter, who do you think is going to do the stability calculations? Or figure out its displacement? Or design a steam plant to move a boat this size and weight? Or even have a single clue how to take command of it when it was built?" He shook his head. "Even if we had the resources to devote to something like this, we don't have anyone here in Grantville who has any idea how to build it. And I've got too many other projects that people do have a clue about to justify diverting our limited—*very* limited, Eddie—resources to building some kind of Civil War navy."

Eddie looked away, staring out the office window for several seconds. Then he looked back at Mike, and his expression was more serious than any Mike recalled ever having seen from him before.

"All right," the young man said. "I understand what you're saying. And I guess I do get carried away sometimes. But there was a reason they built these things back home, Mike, and Gustav Adolf is going to need them a hell of a lot worse than Sherman or Grant ever did."

Mike started a quick reply, then stopped. Just as Eddie had trouble remembering Mike as anything more impressive than the leader of the United Mine Workers local, Mike had trouble thinking of Eddie as anything but one of the local kids. Not quite as geekish as his friend Jeff had been before the Ring of Fire

deposited their hometown in seventeenth-century Germany, but still something of an oddball in rural West Virginia. A computer nerd and a wargamer who was passionately devoted to both pastimes.

Yeah, Mike thought. A geek. But a wargaming geek. He may be short on experience in the real world, but he's spent one hell of a lot more time than I have studying wars and armies and . . . navies.

"All right, Eddie," he sighed. "I'm sure I'm going to regret this, but why is 'Captain General Gars' going to need ironclads so badly?"

"Because he doesn't have railroads," Eddie replied. "That's why rivers and canals are so important to his logistics, Mike. You know that."

Mike nodded slowly. Eddie was certainly right about that, although the youngster hadn't been present for the meetings at which he and Gustavus Adolfus had discussed that very point.

"Without railroads," Eddie continued, "the only way to move really large quantities of supplies is by water. That's why successful seventeenth-century military campaigns usually stuck so close to the lines of navigable rivers. I know we're talking about building steamboats and steam-powered tugs for that very reason, and that should help a lot. But the bad guys are just as well aware of how important rivers are as Gustav Adolf is. When they figure out how much more efficiently he's going to be able to use them with our help, they're going to start trying really hard to stop him. And the best way for them to do that is to attack his shipping on the water, or else build forts or redoubts armed with artillery to try and close off the critical rivers." The teenager shrugged. "Either way, seems to me that something like an ironclad would be the best way to . . . convince them to stay as far away from the river bank as they can get."

The kid had a point, Mike realized. In fact, he might have an even better one than he realized. The major cities of most of Gustavus Adolfus' so-called "vassals" and "allies" also happened to lie on navigable rivers, and altogether too many of those vassals were among the slimiest, most treacherous batch of so-called noblemen in history. Which meant that in a pinch, an armored vessel, heavily armed and immune to said cities' defensive artillery might prove a powerful incentive when it came to honoring their obligations to the Confederated Principalities of Europe and their Emperor.

None of which changed a single thing where the incredible difficulties of Eddie's proposal were concerned.

Eddie started to say something else, then closed his mouth with an almost audible click as he realized Mike was gazing frowningly down at the sketch.

The vessel it depicted would never be called graceful. It was an uncompromising, slab-sided, boxy thing which sat low in the water, and its gun ports and a thick, squat funnel were its only visible external features.

"You're right about how important river traffic is going to be," Mike admitted as he ran one blunt fingertip across the drawing. "But this thing would be an incredible resource hog."

"I know that," Eddie acknowledged. "That's why I'm only suggesting building three of them. God knows we could use as many as we could get, but I knew going in that there was no way you were going to give up enough rails to armor more than that."

"No way in the world," Mike agreed with a grin which held very little humor. "Quentin would scream bloody murder if I gave you enough rails for *one* of these things, much less three! And he wouldn't be alone, either. It's going to take years and years for us to develop an iron industry that can produce steel that good. But that part I could handle . . . if I thought we'd be able to build the damned things in the end."

"Look," Eddie said, "I admit that a lot of that plan is based on the best guesstimates I could come up with from my reference books. At the same time, some of those books are pretty darned good, Mike. I spent a lot of time researching this period when Jeff and Larry decided we just had to do a Civil War ironclads game." He chuckled. "I always was the navy specialist when it came to game design."

"But that's not important. What matters is that it's a starting point. If you can find someone else, someone better qualified to take my notes and my reference books and turn them into something we can build, I'll be delighted to turn them over. You're right. I don't have the least idea how to figure

displacements or allow for stability requirements, and I know the designers screwed up the displacement calculations big time for a lot of the real ironclads built during the Civil War. There was one class of monitor that would've sunk outright if they'd ever tried to mount their turrets! So maybe my enthusiasm did run away with me. But it's more important that this gets done and that it work than that it gets done *my way*."

Mike tipped back in his chair and considered the face across his desk. It was the same face it had always been, and yet, it wasn't. It hadn't changed as much as Jeff Higgins' face had, perhaps, but like every face in Grantville, it had thinned down over the course of the last winter and its sometimes short and always monotonous rations. Eddie had always been wiry; now he'd lost every ounce of excess weight, yet his frame was well muscled from hard physical labor. More to the point, perhaps, that face was no longer as young, as . . . innocent as it had been, and Mike felt a pang of deep, intense pain for the loss of Eddie's last years of childhood.

But a lot of people had lost a lot of things, he reminded himself, and it looked as if Eddie was doing a better job of growing into the reality he faced than Mike had realized when he came bursting into the office. His pride in the concept he'd come up with was obvious, yet it was equally obvious that his offer to turn it over to someone else who might be better qualified to make it work was genuine. Unfortunately, there was no one in Grantville who *was* better qualified. The skills a project like this would call for weren't the sort that were in much demand in a West Virginia coal mining town. To make it work, they would have needed someone with some real expertise in mechanical engineering and heavy fabrication, not to mention running complicated industrial projects. Better yet, someone with some genuine experience with boats and ships. Best of all, someone with some idea about how a real navy worked.

Someone like—

Mike's thoughts broke off in a sudden mental hiccup, and he sat abruptly upright.

"What?" Eddie asked, and Mike shook his head the way he'd shaken off the effect of a particularly good left jab during his days in the ring.

"I'm still not convinced that any of this is doable," he said slowly, contemplating Eddie through half-slitted eyes. "But if—if, I say—it is, then it's possible that there's someone right here in town who'd be perfect—" He broke off and grimaced. "Let me rephrase that. It's possible that there's someone right here in town who could actually make it work."

"There is?" Eddie looked puzzled. "Who?"

"The only person who has any experience at all with this kind of building project," Mike replied, and grinned sourly as Eddie's eyes widened in dawning disbelief.

"That's right," the President of the United States said in a tone which matched his grin's sourness perfectly. "I think we need to consult with my sister's esteemed father-in-law."

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"Let me get this straight." John Chandler Simpson sat on the other side of a slightly battered-looking table in an Appalachian kitchen and regarded Mike through narrow eyes. "You're offering *me* a job."

"I guess you could put it that way," Mike replied in a voice he tried to keep entirely free of any emotion. His years of experience as a union negotiator helped, but it was still difficult. He'd seldom felt as much antipathy for another human being as Simpson evoked, apparently effortlessly, from him.

He sat back in his own chair, letting his eyes rest on the framed prints which brightened Jessica Wendell's friendly kitchen. He could think of very few settings which would have seemed less appropriate for a meeting with the one-time president and CEO of the Simpson Industrial Group, but at least Jessica's willingness to surrender her kitchen as an impromptu conference room had let him keep this meeting out of the public eye.

Not that the present confidentiality would help much when Mike's cabinet found out what they were discussing. He shuddered at the thought of how Melissa Mailey, for example, would react when she discovered that her President had been negotiating anything at all with their arch enemy.

"I must confess," Simpson said after a moment in a poisonously dry tone, "that I find a certain

degree of irony in this."

"I doubt you find it any more ironic than I do," Mike told him levelly.

"Maybe not, but after the way you turned me into some sort of Antichrist in the elections, I have to admire the sheer gall it must have taken for you to suggest anything of the sort."

"Gall doesn't come into it," Mike shot back, then shrugged his broad, powerful shoulders. "Look, Simpson, I don't like you very much. And God knows you've made it plain enough that you like me even less. But the simple fact is that there's no one else in Grantville who'd even know where to begin with a project like this one."

"Well, that's certainly a refreshing admission." Simpson's lips twitched in what, in another man, might have been called a ghost of a smile, but there was very little humor in his eyes. "I suppose I should be flattered that you're willing to grant my expertise in any field."

Mike felt his temper try to flare. He was, by nature, a passionate man, and learning the self-discipline required to control those passions—and his temper—had not come easily to him. But it was a lesson he'd mastered long ago, and although Simpson made it more difficult than most, he wasn't about to forget it now.

"We can sit here pissing in each other's soup all afternoon, if you like," he said instead, throwing the crudity deliberately into the midst of the conversation. "Or we can deal with the reason I came over. Which would you prefer?"

Something flickered in Simpson's eyes. For a moment, Mike thought it was the other man's temper. Then he realized it had been something else. A moment of . . . recognition, perhaps. Or possibly simply an awareness that Mike had no intention of rising to his jibes and giving him the satisfaction of losing his temper.

"Tell me exactly what you have in mind," the ex-CEO said after only the briefest pause.

"It's simple enough." Mike leaned forward in his chair, planting his forearms on the table. "Eddie Cantrell came to see me with the initial proposal. He brought along a stack of reference books, and it turns out that he's got an entire stash of other books we never guessed he had. I should've made a point of going over there and going through the Four Musketeers' library myself. Everybody in town's known for years that the four of them were absolutely buggy where military history and war games were concerned."

He shook his head, eyes momentarily unfocused as he considered the treasure trove he and Frank Jackson had discovered in Eddie and Larry Wild's bookshelves.

"Anyway," he continued briskly, "Eddie has decided that we need a U.S. Navy, and he set out single-handedly to do something about it. Which is how he came up with this."

Mike took a sheet of paper from his shirt pocket, unfolded it, and slid it across the table. Simpson's eyes flicked to it in a casual, almost dismissive glance. Then they snapped back, and he smoothed the sketch's creases as he frowned down at it.

"Cantrell did this?"

"Yeah. He took a course in drafting over at the high school a couple of years ago. Not," Mike added dryly, "that it really prepared him for a career as a maritime engineer."

"I'd say that's a bit of an understatement." Simpson's attention was on the figures listed in the data block in the upper left corner of Eddie's sketch, and he seemed momentarily to have forgotten his obvious dislike for the man across the table from him. He studied the numbers for several seconds, then snorted in something very like amusement.

"This displacement estimate of his has got to be way low," he said. "And even if it weren't, there's no way he's going to get by with a six-foot draft!" He shook his head. "I'd have to do some volume calculations to be certain, but even at his estimated tonnage, this thing is going to draw ten or twelve feet, minimum, and that's too deep for riverine conditions."

Mike chuckled, and Simpson looked quickly up from the sketch.

"I said something funny?" he inquired in a voice which had suddenly remembered its frost.

"No, not really. But you did just demonstrate exactly why I'm sitting here this morning. Do you really think that anyone else in Grantville—or anywhere else in seventeenth-century Europe, for that matter!—could rattle off what you just did?"

"I suppose not," Simpson said after a moment. "Of course, you realize that it's been the better part of twenty years since I did any hands-on hardware work at all."

"Maybe so, but at least you did some once upon a time. And didn't your company have a piece of the Navy's shipbuilding program?"

"Not really. Oh, our electronics division was one of the second-tier contractors on the *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyers' radar systems," Simpson acknowledged. He didn't seem to wonder how it was that Mike had acquired that particular bit of information, and Mike was just as happy he didn't. The breach between John Simpson and his son Tom was a deep and apparently permanent one, and Mike had no intention of admitting that he'd discussed this offer with his brother-in-law at some length before approaching Tom's father.

"But that whole division was really outside our core petro-chemical business," the elder Simpson continued, "and we didn't have anything to do with the hull or the engineering plant. And I damned sure wasn't handling any of the engineering myself! I don't want there to be any misunderstanding on that. Translating this—" he tapped the sketch lightly—"into anything remotely resembling a practical warship would require skills I haven't used since before I ever left the Navy."

"There's been a lot of that going around lately," Mike replied without cracking a smile, and Simpson acknowledged the point with a grunt of sour amusement. He looked down at the sketch for several more moments, lips pursed, then returned his gaze to Mike's face.

"How much authority and support would I have?" he asked.

"As much as I can give you." Mike shrugged. "I'm going to have problems with my own people if I decide to push this one. Quentin Underwood is going to have three kinds of fits the instant he hears about it, and some of the others aren't going to be far behind. Especially not when they find out how many railroad rails we're going to be asking for! But that's not really the worst of it. What's really going to stick in their craws is the impact this kind of diversion of effort will have on all our other projects."

"They'd better get used to it," Simpson said, and his dark eyes sharpened as if to impale Mike. "And so had you."

"What does that mean?" Mike demanded, not quite able to prevent himself from bristling.

"I may not have the library your young Mr. Cantrell does, 'Mr. President,' but I've been something of a student of military history in my time, myself." Simpson's smile was cold. "Do you know what ultimately brought about the downfall of the Swedish Empire?"

"Gustav Adolf was killed," Mike replied.

"Yes, he was. But that wasn't what prevented the Swedes from making their empire stand up. His generals, and especially Torstensson, Baner, and Oxenstierna, had learned their trade well enough to take over from him. What they didn't have was the economy or the manpower to take on the rest of Europe head-on. That was what really devastated Germany during the Thirty Years War. The only way to raise the manpower the Swedes needed, especially when the French turned against them, was to hire what amounted to mercenaries. And then they had to find a way to pay for them."

He shook his head.

"Don't misunderstand me. Gustavus Adolphus and Sweden probably went further than anyone else in the seventeenth century in rationalizing their manpower resources and creating a standing army out of their own population. But the problem was that Sweden simply didn't have the population density to sustain armies of the size it needed. Just as it didn't have the tax base to create the revenues armies that size—whether raised out of its own population or by hiring mercenaries—demanded."

He shrugged.

"So, ultimately, the only real option Sweden saw was to attempt to make war pay for itself by plundering its enemies and extracting the necessary money in 'contributions' from the populations of the

territory it occupied. Unfortunately, it turned out that there was only so much blood in the turnip . . . and it wasn't enough. Some historians still argue that the Swedish Empire really collapsed only when Charles XII finally lost to Peter the Great, but the fact is that it was ultimately unsustainable simply because it lacked the financial and population bases to support it, especially against the inevitable coalitions of nations with larger populations and deeper pockets. And whatever else we may have changed by arriving here, we haven't changed Sweden's demographics."

"I'm aware of that."

In the wrong tone, that sentence could have been dismissive, or a challenge, but it didn't come out that way. In fact, Mike was more than a little surprised by Simpson's analysis. Which, he thought, was probably because the man had shown absolutely no ability or inclination to analyze the social and political realities the transplanted Americans faced with the same acuity.

"In that case," Simpson said levelly, "it's time that you faced the implications. The *military* implications."

Mike started to reply, but Simpson's raised hand stopped him. It wouldn't have, if it had been the arrogant gesture of Management dismissing Labor from consideration. But to Mike's considerable astonishment, it wasn't. It wasn't exactly a gesture of warmth, but it wasn't overtly discourteous or dismissive, either.

"You've made your policies and political platform abundantly clear," Simpson said. "And you've also made it abundantly clear that you intend to put the platform you ran on into effect. I won't pretend I like that, any more than I'll pretend I . . . enjoyed the way you campaigned."

A core of anger glowed in his eyes, but, to his credit, he kept it out of his voice.

"I'll grant you the strength of your own convictions and your sincerity. I don't agree with you, and I hope to hell your social policies don't turn into a complete and total disaster, but that's a fight I've already lost. And I understand your position on the creation of a general . . . industrial infrastructure, for want of a better term. It may surprise you to discover that I actually agree with you, to an extent. There's no way the seventeenth century's ramshackle, top-down excuses for nation states could possibly hope to match the sorts of technological innovations we could introduce, any more than the Soviet Union was able to match the U.S.'s tech and industrial base back home. To match us, they'd have to become *like* us, and we saw back home what happened to the Soviets when they tried to do that."

Mike gazed at the other man with carefully concealed surprise. He and his cabinet had never made any particular secret of their commitment to spreading innovations as widely as possible, but he and his inner circle had never explicitly made the argument Simpson just had. Partly that was to avoid tipping their hand to any seventeenth-century opponent too stupid to see the sucker punch coming, but another reason was that even some of his own cabinet—like Quentin Underwood—would have had conniption fits if they'd realized just how much of his "secret technological advantages" he was willing to give away to bring it about. And Mike had never expected John Chandler Simpson, of all people, to recognize what he had in mind . . . or to acknowledge that his strategy made any sort of sense.

"Unfortunately," Simpson's chair creaked as he leaned back in it and folded his arms, "what happened to the Soviets happened during a *cold* war. Whatever our proxies might have been doing around the periphery, we weren't locked in a direct, life-or-death battlefield confrontation with them. But that's precisely the position Gustav is in right now, and if Sweden goes down, so do we."

"I'm aware of that, too," Mike said. "That's why we organized an army under Frank Jackson in the first place." He grimaced. "Not that sending up-timers out to get shot at is the most efficient imaginable use of their knowledge and skills!"

"Exactly," Simpson said. If possible, the industrialist liked Frank Jackson even less than he liked Mike Stearns, but once again, that seemed to be beside the point to him, and he leaned forward once more, stabbing the tabletop with an emphatic finger. "As a matter of fact, it's the worst *possible* use of their knowledge and skills. And sending them into the field, even with the advantages we can give them in terms of modern weapons, is inevitably going to lead to casualties. And every casualty we suffer is going

to cost us irreplaceable 'knowledge capital.' "

"Are you suggesting that we refuse to risk any of our people and expect Gustav Adolf to foot the entire bill while we just sit around?" Mike demanded. He couldn't quite believe he was having this discussion in the first place, or, in the second, that it seemed Simpson had a brain, after all. The other man certainly hadn't given any sign of it during the constitutional debate or his campaign for the presidency!

"Of course we can't do that, either," Simpson replied. "But in the end, it's really going to come down to how effective an army Gustav can raise and maintain in the field."

"Wait a minute. Wasn't your entire original argument that he doesn't have the money or the population to support a big enough army whatever he does?"

"Yes, it was. But I didn't say anything about army size just now. What I said was that it came down to the *effectiveness* of his army. There's a difference between sheer size and combat power. In a way, you've already acknowledged that by using Jackson and his troops to give Gustav a qualitative edge at places like the Wartburg and the Alte Veste. But doing it that way wastes our most precious resource. What we have to do is to make that qualitative edge integral to Gustav's own forces. He's got to get his manpower requirements down, and the only way for him to do that is for us to take up the slack by providing him with superior weapons and the training and techniques to use them properly, so that his men make up in individual effectiveness what they lose in numbers."

Simpson paused and snorted suddenly with genuine humor, and one of Mike's eyebrows rose questioningly.

"I was just thinking about the presumptuousness involved in 'teaching' one of the greatest captains of history his trade," the industrialist explained. "But that's exactly what it comes down to, in the end. We've got to give him the tools and show him how to use them in a way which will ease the pressure on his population. Give him smaller armies, with the sort of waterborne logistical support your young Mr. Cantrell is advocating, and the superior weapons to let him defeat larger forces, and he'll have a genuine chance of surviving and holding this empire of his together. But the only way we can do that is to divert however much of our own resources and capabilities it takes to support those smaller armies. What it boils down to, is that we'll have to help him downsize—" his eyes glittered with undisguised amusement as Mike stiffened in automatic resistance to the most hated verb in managerese—"and that will mean an inevitable slowdown in how quickly we'll be able to build up other aspects of our infrastructure."

Mike started to reply quickly, then stopped himself. Nothing Simpson had just said came as an actual surprise to him. God knew he and his innermost circle had spent enough time grappling with the same problems and the same limiting factors themselves! But no one else, not even—or perhaps, especially—Frank Jackson, had laid out the points Simpson had just made in such implacably logical order.

And he was right, Mike realized. It was a bitter admission, and only the tiniest edge of its bitterness came from the fact that John Simpson had elicited it. He turned his eyes back to Jessica Wendell's prints, and his lips tightened as he stared at them sightlessly.

He didn't *want* Simpson to be right. He didn't want to divert still more precious resources, and skill, and knowledge to the military. What Europe needed was medicines, a textile industry, steam or internal combustion-powered farm equipment. It needed steamships, railroads, oil wells, and telegraphs. It needed widespread electricity, light bulbs, refrigeration, sanitation, sewage plants, and a food canning industry. There were so *many* things it needed—so many whose mere existence would undermine the aristocracy-dominated excuse for a civilization which was about to turn all of Northern Germany into one huge abattoir.

But to introduce those things, the up-timers and their seventeenth-century countrymen somehow had to survive long enough. And surviving had its own cold, uncaring imperatives. Imperatives, he told himself with what he knew was an edge of pettiness, perfectly suited to John Simpson Chandler.

"You're right," he admitted, and heard the reluctance in his own voice as he did so. "We've already

been discussing possible weapon upgrades with Gustav and Oxenstierna—more 'building down' to something we can produce in quantity instead of trying to use our own weapons as some sort of magic wand."

"I'm relieved to hear it," Simpson said. "But it's going to be just as important to show them how to get the most out of whatever we can provide for them."

"I'm sure it is. Unfortunately, aside from a few youthful enthusiasts like Eddie and his buddies, we're awfully short on people who understand how to do that."

"I'm not surprised." Simpson drummed on the tabletop for a few moments, and Mike surprised an expression on his face which might almost have been one of hesitation. If it was, it vanished quickly, and Simpson looked directly back at him.

"For what it's worth," he said, "I really am quite well grounded in military history. It's one of the few hobby interests Tom and I share." An undisguised flash of raw pain flooded through his eyes at the mention of his son's name, but his voice never flinched. "What we really need here is one of those historical reenactors—somebody who spent his vacations marching around in a Union Army uniform with a Springfield rifle-musket on his shoulder. But I assume we don't have any of those?"

Mike smiled crookedly. "Sure we do—probably a dozen of them, at least. The first battle of the Civil War was fought at Philippi, not more than an hour's drive from here."

Simpson brightened visibly.

"I should have thought of that, but I suppose I simply assumed that the local population was too small to support many of them. I hope you're making them available to Gustav and his army? Someone with hands-on experience like that with nineteenth-century weapons, tactics, and formation drill would be worth me, Jackson, and Cantrell all rolled into one."

"I know," Mike agreed, but his tone was considerably less enthusiastic than Simpson's, and he grimaced irritably when the industrialist cocked his head in question.

"Our problem is that most of them have skills we need just as badly somewhere else. Down at the power plant, for example, or over at the mine. Dwight Rogers is a perfect example of the problem. He's been a reenactor for at least ten or fifteen years, but he's also the only man in town with actual up-time oil field experience, and that makes him critical to Quentin's oil project."

"I see." Simpson studied Mike's expression for several seconds, then shrugged. "I see," he repeated, "and I understand the problem. But I think you're going to have to consider this the first example of sacrificing infrastructure to survival. We *need* those men—need not just their actual skills, but also their ability to sell seventeenth-century professional soldiers on the concept that we can show them how to do their jobs better than they can now. In fact, you ought to have people like that in Magdeburg already, working with the Swedes there as military advisers."

"Um." Mike stared out a window while he chewed that unpalatable argument. It seemed to be Simpson's day for making him consider things he didn't want to think about, he reflected. And, once again, Simpson was right.

Damn it to hell.

"Okay," he sighed finally. "You're probably No, scratch that, you *are* right. But I've still got to consider how many birds I can kill with each stone." He pondered some more, rubbing the tip of an index finger in slow, thoughtful circles on the tabletop, then nodded to himself.

"All right," he said, focusing on Simpson once more. "I don't know if I can make this permanent yet—we'll have to look at the competing demands on his time—but Jere Haygood's a reenactor, and a good one. He was also the senior partner of the one civil engineering firm we had here in Grantville before the Ring of Fire. Which means, of course, that there are at least seven things we need him to be doing simultaneously . . . including training other engineers. At the moment, though, he's heading one of the teams working with Gustav's engineers on improving the Stecknitz canal, which means he's already on the river. But if we go ahead with this project, you're going to need someone like him to help you lay out your shipyard, at the very least, right?"

"It would certainly be an enormous help," Simpson agreed.

"In that case, I'll send him a radio message and tell him to meet you in Magdeburg. You can discuss the engineering aspects of this whole idea with him, and there are enough other projects going on in and around Magdeburg that Pete McDougal probably really needs access to one of our better engineers on an ongoing basis, anyway. And we can see about having him assigned as our official liaison to Gustav Adolf's engineering corps. God knows we're going to need someone assigned permanently to that slot in a teaching role, if nothing else, and that should also get his foot in the door with the Swedish officer corps in general."

Simpson pursed his lips, obviously considering the notion carefully, then nodded.

"That sounds like an excellent idea," he said, and his tone was approving, if not precisely warm. "And it certainly does kill multiple birds with a single rock. Of course, he's still going to be so busy with other jobs that they'll undoubtedly interfere badly with his ability to function purely as a military adviser. On the other hand, once we actually begin providing Gustav's troops with better weapons, we'll just have to find someone else to assist him. Someone you'll be able to spare from other responsibilities then even if you can't spare him now.

"In the meantime, I would certainly be willing to make what *I* know myself available. And I wasn't always an engineer during my naval service. Unlike Mr. Underwood, my own early experience was in the combat arms."

"That might . . . be very useful," Mike said slowly, with what he hoped was well hidden caution. He had a sudden vision of Simpson ingratiating himself with the most conservative and inherently dangerous elements of Gustav Adolf's army. Or, even worse, the CPE's more reluctant German princes.

Yet even as the thought crossed his mind, he told himself that it was foolish. Conservative—maybe even reactionary—Simpson undoubtedly was, but the most reactionary twenty-first-century American imaginable was hopelessly and radically liberal compared to someone like John George of Saxony.

Which didn't mean that Simpson wouldn't do his absolute level best to build his own little empire if he had even half a chance. In fact, it would be asinine to expect anything else out of him. Whatever Mike might think of him on a personal basis, no one was successful at the persistently high level of industrial performance Simpson had demonstrated without being extremely capable himself. And that capability, especially in a situation like the one the up-timers faced, would inevitably attract power like a magnet if Mike allowed him to exercise it.

If.

Ultimately, he reflected, that was what it came down to. If Mike allowed his worst political enemy to demonstrate that there was an area in which he was truly and provably competent, it could have incalculable consequences for the future. But Mike was still in the position of a man with no choice but to run even faster to prevent himself from falling.

Besides, if I let a man like Simpson beat me just because there's one area in which he's competent, then I'll deserve whatever the hell happens to me!

"We'll have to think about that," he continued after a moment. "About the best way to make use of your experience and knowledge, I mean. But in the meantime, what about Eddie's design?"

"I think it has . . . potential," Simpson replied, accepting the return to the topic which had originally brought Mike there. "It's going to need a lot of work to make it practical, but assuming that the Allocations Committee is willing to commit the resources and we can come up with the manpower and the funding, I think we can probably build them. Of course, once we do, we'll have to come up with crews for them, as well."

"I know." Mike gazed at the other man for a few more seconds, then inhaled unobtrusively.

"If I sign off on it, the Allocations Committee will, too," he said confidently. "I don't say it will be easy, but I'll bring them around in the end. But if I do, would you be willing to take charge of it?"

"Not without conditions," Simpson said after a moment.

"What sort of conditions?" Mike felt himself slipping into the natural stance of a negotiator, and a

small smile flickered around Simpson's mouth, as if he felt the same thing.

"If I build them, then I command them," he said flatly. "It's not going to be easy, however much support you can give me. I'd have to build a shipyard before I could start building ships in it, and part of the job would have to include training the local work force I'd need. The same holds true for building crews to man them, as well. It's going to take time and careful organization to make any of this work, and I'm not really in the habit of involving myself in projects that fail. I refuse to oversee the expenditure of so much of our resources just to let someone else screw up and misuse the final product when I'm done."

He showed his teeth in a brief, fierce grin.

"So I suppose that, in the end, it comes down to how much you trust me, 'Mr. President.' Do you need my expertise badly enough to piss off 'General Jackson' and risk putting *me* in command of your navy?"

Mike met that flash of a grin with an unsmiling, level look of his own, and several seconds of silence hovered in the Wendell kitchen. Then the President of the United States smiled ever so slightly himself.

"Actually, I think 'Admiral Simpson' has a certain ring to it," he said.

* * *

"I can't believe this," Eddie Cantrell muttered under his breath. "*Simpson?*" He shook his head.

"Don't even go there, Eddie," Mike growled softly, and Eddie flushed as he realized that he hadn't spoken quite as much under his breath as he thought he had.

"I had enough trouble with Frank and Quentin—not to mention Melissa!" Mike continued. "You wanted your damned ironclads, and you're probably going to get them, so I wouldn't go looking any gift horses in the teeth, if I were you."

Eddie grimaced at the reference to "gift horses" and glowered for a moment at the flesh-and-blood horse whose reins he held. In his considered opinion, horses were a very poor substitute for motorcycles, and his posterior wasn't looking forward to the journey to Magdeburg.

"Sorry," he said, after a moment. "And I meant it when I said I'd be willing to turn everything over to someone else if they knew how to get the job done. But I gotta tell you, Mike—I'm not too crazy about putting Simpson in command of anything, much less the Navy."

"If we're going to do this at all, then he's the best man for the job," Mike said, just a bit more positively than he actually felt. "On the other hand, I'd be lying if I didn't admit that I'm just as happy he'll have you along for this little trip."

Eddie cocked his head at Mike, then nodded slowly.

"Gotcha," he said. "I'll keep the bastard honest."

"That wasn't exactly what I meant," Mike said somewhat repressively, already wishing he hadn't said anything about it at all. "Look, Eddie, you don't like Simpson. Well, *I* don't like him very much, either. But don't ever make the mistake of thinking the man is stupid or incompetent in his own area. Or that we don't need him just as badly as we need Nat Davis or Greg Ferrara. You're going along to help him find the right spot for his shipyard. You are *not* going along as some sort of Gestapo agent. Is that understood?"

"Understood," Eddie replied contritely, and Mike shrugged.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to bite your head off. But this is important, and we don't need anyone creating still more problems to overcome. At the same time, if you happen to notice anything you feel ought to be called to our attention, I expect you to do it."

"Understood," Eddie repeated in a somewhat different tone, and Mike nodded. He started to say something else, then broke off as Simpson came trotting around the corner on his own horse.

It irritated Mike that Simpson had already known how to ride when they arrived in Thuringia. Worse, the man rode Western-style, so Mike couldn't even put it down to an effete, socially pretentious thing like polo.

The beautifully tailored three-piece business suits which had accompanied Simpson to Grantville for his son's wedding had long since disappeared. The older man wore boots, denims, a flannel shirt, and a

light nylon windbreaker against the late-spring chill of Northern Germany, and Mike was still a little surprised by how much the change in clothing changed the man's image. The John Chandler Simpson trotting briskly along the street looked very little like the supercilious city slicker who'd come to Grantville so long ago. This man was tall and broad shouldered—as tall as his son, even if he didn't have Tom's sheer mass of muscle. Then again, *no one* in the seventeenth-century was as massively built as Tom was. Which meant that "not as massive" certainly wasn't the same thing as "ninety-eight-pound weakling," and little though Mike might have cared to admit it, there'd always been far more muscle and far less fat on Simpson's powerful frame than many another senior up-time executive might have claimed. The recently past winter had wiped away most of the fat which had been there, too.

"Gentlemen," Simpson acknowledged them in brusque, no-nonsense tones as he reined in his mount beside them.

"Mr. Simpson," Mike replied. Eddie only nodded, but he clambered up into his own saddle. Not, Mike observed, with any particular grace. Eddie had learned to ride since the Ring of Fire, but only in the sense that he no longer fell off the horse whenever it stopped. At that, he was doing better than his friend Jeff, but it was all Mike could do to keep himself from breaking out into laughter at Eddie's expression as he contemplated the long ride to Magdeburg.

At least the youngster would be spared the indescribable motion of a coach trip over seventeenth-century roads, and that was nothing to sneeze at. The main road to Magdeburg was slated for improvement as an urgent priority, but it was going to be a while before it could be accomplished.

"Don't forget to check in with the radio shack when you get there," Mike admonished, and Simpson nodded. Grantville's limited number of radio hams were busy training more operators and planning the construction of simple crystal sets to eke out and support the handful of modern radios which had accompanied them back to Thuringia. It was going to be a while before there were enough of them for more than purely limited use, but installing one of them at the new imperial capital had been a high priority.

"I guess that's about it, then," Mike continued. "We'll be waiting to hear from you."

Simpson gave him another not-quite-curt nod, touched his heels to his horse, and started off without another word. Eddie looked at Mike one more time, then shrugged and headed off—far less gracefully—in Simpson's wake.

* * *

By the time they reached Magdeburg, a few days later, Eddie had developed a new, even stronger, first-hand appreciation of the advantages of water transport in the seventeenth century. He would vastly have preferred to make the shorter trip overland to Halle and then travel down the river to Magdeburg, but there'd been a few unpleasant incidents along the river. Everyone agreed that they *thought* it was only isolated bands of brigands—probably mercenaries who were currently unemployed because Gustav Adolf had destroyed the armies to which they had once been attached—who'd turned to a little freelance river piracy to survive the winter. That was the official story, anyway. Personally, Eddie was none too certain that it wasn't a bit more organized than that. There were certainly enough German nobles who hated and feared the up-timer Americans' impact, starting with John George of Saxony, himself. It wouldn't surprise Eddie a bit to discover that one or more of them had been turning a blind eye to attacks on said Americans' barge traffic.

The situation was improving, in large part because Gustav had begun operating patrols of Finnish and Lapp cavalry—whose fearsome reputations were well deserved—along the more dangerous sections of the river. But for the moment, President Stearns and his cabinet had preferred to send their two-man shipbuilding force to Magdeburg by a more arduous but less adventurous route.

And "arduous" it had certainly been. Every muscle Eddie had seemed to ache with its own individual protest, but that background chorus was nothing to the throbbing ache in his thighs and buttocks. The inns at which they had spent their nights had been an experience of eye-opening unpleasantness in their own right, and he was uncomfortably certain that he had acquired all too many multi-legged insectoid boarders.

But at least they were finally here . . . not that "here" was all that impressive. Magdeburg had been a largish city by here-and-now standards before Count Tilly's troops had massacred the population and burned the place to the ground in the worst single atrocity yet of the ongoing Thirty Years War. The nightmare event had rallied opposition to Tilly and the Imperialists from all over Protestant Germany and provided Gustav Adolf's army with one of the most chilling war cries of the entire war: "Magdeburg quarter"—the promise to be just as merciful to Tilly's men as they had been to the citizens of Magdeburg.

But Magdeburg's history, as well as its central location and its access to the Elbe River, had made it the inevitable choice as the capital of Gustav's new Confederated Principalities of Europe. The heaps of charred rubble surrounding the cathedral—the only structure in the entire city which had been spared the torch—had largely disappeared now, and reconstruction was well underway. The sheer devastation of the old city had given Gustav's architects the opportunity to design a proper capital, with a coordinated street plan of long, straight avenues and spacious squares, and the skeleton of the new city to be was plainly evident. But so was the sprawl of temporary quarters, thrown up in haste and without any apparent plan or order, for the work force laboring upon the new buildings and streets. And it seemed evident to Eddie as he gazed out over the site that the area outside the old city walls, where the foundations of the new factories and warehouses were going in, had not profited from the same degree of city planning.

"Quite a mess, isn't it?" Simpson remarked.

Eddie looked at him. The lengthy, arduous trip had forced him to alter his opinion of Simpson . . . some. They hadn't exactly whiled away the journey in deep, philosophical discussion. In fact, they hadn't spoken to one another any more than they had to. But despite himself, Eddie had been impressed by how little Simpson had complained. Of course, Eddie thought resentfully, Simpson's posterior probably didn't ache quite as much as his own did. At the same time, however, Simpson was at least thirty years older than he was, and even though there had to be plenty of room for aches and pains in those extra decades, Simpson showed absolutely no sign of them.

Yet what had truly surprised Eddie was the calm, almost matter of fact way Simpson had accepted the primitive nature of both their transportation and their accommodations along the way. He'd expected the ex-CEO to demand the very best, and to throw temper tantrums if he didn't get it. But it hadn't worked out that way.

Simpson had displayed an amazing talent for hard, shrewd bargaining over the cost of their rooms every night—almost as if the money were coming out of his own pocket, rather than out of the funds the U.S. government had provided for the trip. And it had been obvious that he wasn't prepared to be fobbed off with anything less than the best the inns had been able to provide. Yet that "best" had fallen dismally short of anything he would have tolerated for a heartbeat "back home," and he hadn't said a word. In fact, he'd accepted the limitations of their accommodations far more patiently than Eddie had, and he'd actually tipped the staffs when they left.

Eddie wasn't quite sure what to make of that, but it had at least cracked the armor of his preconceptions where Simpson was concerned. Not that he was prepared to surrender his distrust just yet. Simpson was still the arrogant bastard who'd tried to waltz into Grantville and take over the entire town. And he was still the slimeball politician who'd thrown in with the bigoted rednecks who'd opposed extending the vote to anyone who hadn't been born up-time. Which meant, by definition, that he was The Enemy.

None of which affected the fact that his observations summed up Eddie's own impression of Magdeburg quite handily.

"Calling this a mess is an insult to any other mess," he said, after a moment, and Simpson surprised him yet again with a dry chuckle.

"Oh, I've seen worse. Not very often, mind you, but I've seen worse. And given what they had to start with, I'm actually surprised they've done this well with it so quickly."

Eddie glanced at him speculatively. He'd been more prepared for Simpson to make some cutting

remark about primitive construction techniques and lousy seventeenth-century architects. Instead, the older man's tone was merely thoughtful. Indeed, it might actually have been approving, mind-boggling though that possibility seemed to Eddie.

"Well," Simpson continued after a moment, "I suppose we should check in with the local authorities and get off a radio message that we've arrived. This way, I think, Mr. Cantrell."

He urged his mount into motion, and Eddie found himself—once again—following the rear end of John Chandler Simpson's horse.

* * *

The streets of Magdeburg, such as they were, were a hive of activity. In fact, they were so busy that Eddie quickly decided to swallow his pride, dismount, and lead his horse. The journey from Grantville had been long enough for even his horsemanship to improve appreciably, but he knew his limits, and the first time one of the clattering, wooden-wheeled carts came rumbling unexpectedly out of a cross street, he knew he'd reached them. He managed to survive his horse's rearing protest at the sudden, frightening intrusion, but it was a very near thing, and he scrambled out of the saddle with far more haste than grace.

Simpson, on the other hand, simply sat there in the saddle, gazing at him with one quirked eyebrow. *His* horse, needless to say, scarcely even tossed its head. Eddie would have loved to put its calmness down to its innately placid disposition, but he knew it had far more to do with the hand upon the reins and the rider in the saddle.

Simpson waited until he was certain Eddie had the reins firmly in hand, then clucked gently to his mount and led the way through the bustling confusion of workmen, carts, freight wagons, occasional squads of Swedish soldiers, and street vendors. Eddie followed, glowering at the older man's ramrod-straight spine and feeling like a total doofus.

original cobblestones were interspersed with and crossed by muddy tracks—usually more puddle than mud, actually—and Eddie was grateful that he'd worn boots instead of sneakers. Nikes weren't exactly the footwear of choice when it came to wading through ankle-deep holes full of water and gooey mud.

Eddie hadn't seen so many people in one place, outside Grantville itself, since arriving in the seventeenth century. And the activity around him very nearly approached the frantic industry with which Grantville had expanded its housing to face the demands of the winter just past. The smell of smoke, the clatter of tools, the bellows of foremen, and the incredible smells of too many people crowded into too little space.

The smell bothered Eddie even more because it was so different from what he'd become accustomed to. He'd discovered, to his surprise, that seventeenth-century German notions of public sanitation were far better than he'd expected from his limited knowledge of history. Melissa Mailey had explained to him that was because he assumed that *British* history was synonymous with "history." It was in fact true that, as a rule, public sanitation in seventeenth-century Britain was just as bad as Eddie assumed—Edinburgh was especially notorious all over Europe for its filth, with London not too far behind. But most German towns had a long-established system of cleaning up public refuse, including human waste, with a class of people employed exclusively for that purpose. It was a system which Americans despised, since it involved relegating the caste of waste-haulers to pariah social status, almost like the caste system in Hindu India. Still, it normally served to keep the worst aspects of public refuse to a reasonable level.

The problem was that Magdeburg was, for all practical purposes, a brand new city. And one which, he suspected, had already been sufficiently "infected" with American social and political notions for the standard system of public sanitation to be functioning haphazardly at best. Not for the first time since the Ring of Fire, Eddie was discovering that social change, in the betwixt-and-between period, often had as many drawbacks as it did advantages.

So, he was more than merely grateful when Simpson finally drew up outside the hastily thrown together walls of a building two blocks from Magdeburg's temporary town hall.

Half a dozen Swedish musketeers stood guard outside the American "embassy's" entrance, accompanied by a single American in deer hunter's cammies and armed with a semi-auto Browning shotgun. The difference between the sleek, up-time weapon and the clumsy Swedish matchlocks was almost as marked as the difference between the Swedes' cold-eyed alertness and the American's obvious casualness.

Simpson dismounted slowly and handed his reins to the groom who came trotting around a corner of the hastily assembled structure to take them. The same groom collected Eddie's horse, as well, and Eddie was delighted to let him have it. Indeed, he hoped he'd never see the sharp-spined nag again.

But Simpson paid very little attention to the groom. He'd paused long enough to remove his saddlebags before he let the man take his horse, yet his attitude was very different from one he'd demonstrated when he and Eddie had stopped at one of the inns along the way. Then, he'd taken considerable pains to be certain that his mount would be properly cared for; this time his attention was fully focused on the sentries in front of the building.

No, Eddie realized. Not on all the sentries—only on Matt Lowry, the American.

Simpson's frown was not a pleasant thing to see. He looked, Eddie thought, like a man who'd gotten a sudden whiff of a three-day-dead skunk, and his own resentment rose in automatic reflex. Obviously, the rich bigshot from Pittsburgh could hardly contain his contempt for the hillbilly in front of him. Probably because Matt hadn't kowtowed properly in the face of Simpson's innate superiority!

Eddie waited for Simpson to say something, but the older man only pressed his lips firmly together and nodded to the trooper who was obviously the senior member of the Swedish guards. Then he slung his saddlebags over his shoulder and strode into the building.

* * *

"You're here to do what?" Pete McDougal asked.

Before the Ring of Fire, Pete had headed up the safety committee for the same local chapter of the United Mine Workers of which Mike Stearns had been president. Now he was Mike Stearns' personal representative in Magdeburg, at least until the rebuilding capital was ready for a larger American presence. Whether he was there as an ambassador to the CPE or to serve the interests of "Captain General Gars" was an interesting point, but McDougal had the natural diplomacy required to discharge both functions at once.

At the moment, however, that diplomacy appeared to be in abeyance.

"I thought my written authorization was clear enough," Simpson replied coolly.

"Well, I guess it is," McDougal admitted. He looked at Simpson with obvious dislike, but his tone was reasonably courteous. "It just sort of took me by surprise. Nobody warned me you were coming."

"Somehow, I'm not surprised," Simpson said dryly. "Should I assume that that also means that Mr. Haygood has not yet arrived, either?"

"No, you shouldn't. As a matter-of-fact, Jere got here yesterday evening, but there was obviously some kind of screwup. He got the message to head on over, but no one told him exactly why he was supposed to do it." McDougal shrugged. "One of the problems with radio messages when you don't get to talk directly to the person who sent them to you."

"That sort of confusion is something we'd better get over," Simpson observed. "But at least he's here. And I trust that you'll be able to render us the assistance President Stearns assured me we'd receive despite the confusion?"

"I'll try," McDougal said. "But if Mike had warned me you were coming, I would've told him we're way too shorthanded already. I don't know who I've got available to assign as a local guide. Jere doesn't know Magdeburg any better than you do."

"What about Matt Lowry?" Eddie asked. He knew he should have kept his mouth shut, but the look Simpson had given Lowry had really rubbed him the wrong way. The notion of getting Matt assigned as Simpson's guide as a way to rub the old-so-superior bastard's nose in his dependence upon the hillbillies who surrounded him appealed strongly to the teenager.

"Can't spare him," McDougal replied promptly. "Frank—I mean, General Jackson," he corrected himself, glancing at Simpson from the corner of his eye—"made it standing orders that we have to have at least one up-timer on guard here all the time. And Matt's picked up more Swedish than almost anyone else I've got."

"That's a wise precaution on General Jackson's part," Simpson said, and Eddie saw the surprise on McDougal's face. But then Simpson continued in a coldly dispassionate voice. "I can understand why his ability to pick up the local language would make this Mr. Lowry particularly valuable. It's a pity, however, that the language appears to be the *only* thing he's picked up from the Swedes."

"Meaning what?" McDougal demanded, his expression tightening with anger as Simpson's tone registered.

"Meaning that the Swedish troopers outside your front door are at least five times as alert as he is," Simpson said flatly. "It's pathetic. He's got twice the firepower of everyone else out there, and if it weren't for the Swedes looking out for him, anyone who wanted to would walk right past him. Or worse."

"Now just a minute!" McDougal said hotly. "Matt's been assigned here for over three months, and nobody's ever come close to getting past him! And unlike certain people," he very carefully did not glare pointedly at Simpson, "he was with the Army at the Alte Veste and the Wartburg. Did damned well there, too."

"He probably did," Simpson conceded, apparently completely oblivious to McDougal's dig at his own absence from both those battles. "And I don't believe I expressed any doubts about his courage or his willingness to fight. But there's a difference between guts and willingness and *discipline*, and discipline is what keeps a man on something as boring as sentry duty alert, effective . . . and *alive*. The Swedes have it; he doesn't."

He held McDougal's eyes levelly, and to Eddie's astonishment, it was Pete who looked away.

"Well, anyway, I can't spare him," McDougal muttered. Then he shook himself. "I'll have to see if I can find you a local. How good is your German?"

"Passable," Simpson replied, "but Mr. Cantrell's is better than mine." The calmly delivered compliment—if that was what it was—took Eddie by surprise, but McDougal only nodded.

"In that case, I think I can probably find someone. It may take a while, though. Do you have someplace to stay while you're here?"

"No."

"I imagine I can find you a room, then. We're still working on the living quarters of our 'embassy' here. I'm sure we'll get the whole thing finished up . . . eventually. But in the meantime, there's a sort of a boarding house for up-timers and some of the more senior Swedish and Scottish officers. It's more like a barracks, really, but it's only a couple of blocks east of here. We can put you up there."

"That will be fine, given the state of the local construction efforts," Simpson told him. "I suppose Mr. Cantrell and I should head on over and get ourselves settled in while you find us our guide. Will you go ahead and radio Grantville to confirm our arrival?"

"I'll take care of it," McDougal said.

"Thank you. In that case, I'll be looking forward to meeting Mr. Haygood and our guide." He nodded to McDougal, then glanced at Eddie.

"Come along, Mr. Cantrell," he said.

* * *

As a citizen of the seventeenth-century United States, Eddie had become far more accustomed to walking than he'd ever been as a twenty-first-century American. Which turned out to be a good thing as he tagged along behind an obviously indefatigable Simpson, Jere Haygood, and their local guide, Dietrich Schwanhausser.

Haygood was a weathered-looking man in his mid-forties, with light brown-colored hair and hazel eyes. He wore work clothes and high-topped, laced boots which had undoubtedly been comfortably worn long before the Ring of Fire, and an old Army Single-Action Colt revolver rode in a black ballistic

nylon holster at his belt. He was built on the lean and rangy model, and he moved with a quick, boundless energy that made Eddie tired just watching him. Simpson, of course, simply took it all in stride.

Eddie didn't know Haygood well—they'd never actually met before the Ring Fire—but it had been obvious from the beginning that the engineer wasn't a Simpson admirer. He'd been civil enough, but that had been about all anyone could have said for his attitude.

Schwanhausser, on the other hand, had been another matter entirely. He hadn't lived in Magdeburg before its destruction, but most of his relatives had, and he'd lost them all. Apparently, that was part of what had drawn him to the reemerging city as it arose like a dusty, smoky, chaotic phoenix from its own ashes. The fact that he spoke more than passable Swedish and was already acquiring at least a smattering of English had made him extremely valuable to the new capital's local authorities, but McDougal had lured him away from them. Exactly how he'd done so remained something of a mystery to Eddie, but the two computers McDougal had been assigned from Grantville's precious supply of desktops seemed to have had something to do with it.

Whatever the reason for it, Schwanhausser had become one of McDougal's primary liaisons with the city government, and his familiarity with the endless construction projects which typified Magdeburg had proven most useful. The fact that he and Simpson got along like a house on fire (not, Eddie admitted to himself, perhaps the best chosen metaphor, here in the ashes of Magdeburg) didn't seem to be hurting things, either.

Eddie felt more like a half-forgotten appendage than ever as he followed the other three about. Simpson's German was considerably better than his comments to McDougal had suggested. It wasn't as colloquial as the German Eddie had been soaking up through his pores ever since he'd arrived here, and there were times when it sounded more than a little stiff, even odd, to a seventeenth-century ear . . . or to a twenty-first-century ear which had learned the language in the seventeenth, but it was quite adequate for his needs.

So was Haygood's. The engineer had started out following Simpson around with a somewhat martyred expression. Obviously, his most earnest desire had been to be somewhere else, doing something *useful*. But as the tour of possible shipyard sites continued, Haygood had become increasingly animated. Apparently, the engineer in him was sufficiently fascinated by the task at hand to at least temporarily overcome his antipathy for Simpson. By the time late morning had turned into midafternoon, he was waxing positively enthusiastic over the possibilities.

Eddie was more than a little surprised by that. And, if he was going to be honest, he was also a little disappointed. Not that he wanted the ironclad project to do anything but succeed, of course. It just . . . irritated him to see a good Stearns loyalist hobnobbing with John Chandler Simpson so energetically.

But if Haygood's reaction irritated Eddie, the way Schwanhausser seemed to respond to the industrialist bothered him on a much more profound level. It was as if there were some almost organic relationship between the two of them. One Eddie could sense but not really understand. Something which had automatically located them in relationship to one another in some sort of hierarchy or continuum Eddie hadn't even realized existed.

He decided he didn't like whatever it was. Part of that probably stemmed from his ingrained distrust of anything Simpson did and, especially, his suspicion of Simpson's empire-building tendencies, which made him uncomfortable with the easy authority the older man seemed to possess in Schwanhausser's eyes. But even more than that, he suspected, it was because he'd already seen quite a few seventeenth-century Germans who seemed to find the role of bootlicker a natural fit.

That was the one thing Eddie most hated when he encountered it. He supposed it would have been foolish to expect every German in the seventeenth century to be another Gretchen Richter, or even her brother Hans. And by and large, the majority of the German citizens of the United States had done a remarkable job of adapting to the incredibly radical—by seventeenth-century standards—ideology and political freedoms the up-timers had brought with them. In fact, the way some of them—like Gretchen—had seized the twenty-first-century concepts and run with them sometimes frightened even

Eddie just a bit.

But not all of them had adapted. Some of them had good (by their standards) and obvious reasons for disliking the bottom-to-top changes the up-time Americans had inflicted upon them. Those were the people who'd held positions of power and authority under the old order and found the notion of being held accountable by the subjects over whom they had previously ruled but who had now become their fellow citizens most distasteful. Yet some of those same former subjects seemed almost equally lost and unhappy. Perhaps it was because they feared the changes were only temporary—that the United States' enemies would succeed in destroying it after all. If that happened, there would undoubtedly be reprisals against those who had supported the new order when the old one returned to power. And in some cases, it was probably as simple as plain old uncertainty. A case of having learned the old rules of the society which was being remade all about them so well that they felt uncomfortable, even frightened by the ambiguities with which the new rules confronted them.

Whatever it was, Eddie didn't like it when he encountered it, and he'd seen a lot more of it since leaving Grantville. Maybe it was only natural for the people in the small towns and villages who so far had had little direct, personal contact with the up-timers to be less certain, more hesitant. He hoped that was all it was—that as the United States continued to expand outward from Grantville, its spreading influence would erode that hesitation and replace it with the same sort of often fractious independence he'd seen in Grantville itself.

But it hadn't yet, and one of the results was that sometimes an up-timer, even someone who still (in the privacy of his own mind) thought of himself as only a kid, found himself being deferred to and kowtowed to as if he were a natural born aristocrat. No doubt some of them enjoyed that, but it made Eddie's skin crawl when it happened to him.

Of course, he thought sourly, watching Schwanhausser and Haygood listening intently to Simpson, someone like Simpson probably ate it up with a spoon.

". . . need deep water close to the bank," Simpson said as he and the other two stood side-by-side in ankle-deep mud, staring out over an Elbe River that was still high, wide, and murky with the spring floods. The up-timer gestured energetically at the water. "When we send them down the launch ways, they're going to have a tendency to drive downward into the mud if there's not enough depth of water."

"How many feet deep, Herr Simpson?" Schwanhausser asked. Simpson looked momentarily taken aback, but Schwanhausser smiled. "I have been learning your system of measurement," he reassured the American.

"You have?" Simpson looked down at the shorter German.

"Oh, of course!" Schwanhausser chuckled. "Many of our 'honest merchants' are screaming to the very heavens over the thought of adopting a truly universal standard set of measures, but the Emperor has made it quite clear that the entire Confederated Principalities *will* adopt your system. And it will be such a relief to deal in feet and yards which are the same from one end of the land to the other, instead of dealing with 'paces' which may be one length in Saxony and another in, say, Westphalia!"

"You can say that again!" Haygood snorted. "And what it's going to mean for engineering projects is even more important. For one thing, we're going to make damned sure that when we get around to building our railroads, 'standard gauge' means just that—*standard* gauge." He grimaced. "None of that business of every outfit building its own private set of rails to whatever gauge suited it."

Simpson glanced at the engineer and nodded.

"I actually hadn't considered that aspect of the rail extension project, Mr. Haygood. Of course, I'm sure that's only one small instance of ways in which true standardized units of measure are going to provide immense benefits. Although—" he turned to Schwanhausser "—I suppose I can see why some of your merchants might not find the prospect particularly delightful, even if that is incredibly shortsighted of them in the long term. But as far as our problem goes here, I can't really give you a definite answer until I know more about the design displacements of the ships themselves. Let's say that I'm probably going to need somewhere around twelve feet minimum depth."

"Um." Schwanhausser plucked gently at his lower lip in thought. "We should be able to find you that much water, Herr Simpson. But to get it, you may have to extend your . . . launching ways further out from the bank."

"Mr. Haygood?" Simpson asked, cocking an eyebrow at the engineer.

"That we can do," Haygood assured him.

"Well, in that case," Schwanhausser said, "I think this area here might meet your requirements. As far as I know, all of this stretch of the river—from there, at the corner of that factory's lot, clear down to that small point in the angle of the bend—is still available. That would give you a frontage on the river of—what? Perhaps two hundred of your yards?"

"More like two hundred and fifty," Simpson mused.

"Actually," Haygood said, casting his engineer's eye over the same distance, "it's probably about two hundred and seventy-five. Closer to three hundred than to two hundred, anyway."

"I will defer to your judgment," Schwanhausser said, then laughed. "I did say I was *learning* your units of measurement, not that I have already mastered them!"

Simpson chuckled slightly and turned his back to the river while he studied the terrain for several minutes. They were well outside the old walls of Magdeburg. In fact, they were beyond even the area already being developed for the new factories.

"I could really use even more frontage than that, actually," he said.

"We're only building three ships," Eddie pointed out. He tried very hard to avoid sounding like he was nitpicking, but from the expressionless glance Simpson gave him he suspected that he hadn't completely succeeded.

"No, Mr. Cantrell," the older man said after a moment. "If, in fact, I agree to accept the responsibility for building your ironclads, they will most assuredly not be the only ships built here. At the very least, we'll be building additional tugs and barges. More importantly, don't you think it would be a good idea to provide a little something in the way of support for your battleships? In one sense, after all, it doesn't matter how powerful and well armored we make them, does it? If there are only three of them, then they can only be in three places at once, and I can assure you that we'll need to cover more than three places at a time sooner than you may expect."

"Well, yeah," Eddie said. "But right *now*, all we're authorized to build is the ironclads."

"Actually," Simpson said in a voice whose patient tone surprised Eddie, "we aren't authorized to build *anything* at this particular moment. All we have is President Stearn's—" he managed to use Mike's title without so much as a hint of sarcasm, Eddie noticed, and wondered if that was because of Haygood's and Schwanhausser's presence—"assurance that if he decides to support the project he'll succeed in obtaining authorization for it."

He smiled very slightly at Eddie's expression.

"Don't get excited, Mr. Cantrell. The President and I may not see eye to eye on a great many issues, but I don't doubt for moment that if he decides to push the ironclads through, he'll succeed. In fact, I expect him to. And I also expect him to support my proposal to construct a fleet of timberclads to back them up."

"Timberclads?" Eddie could almost feel his ears perk up, and Haygood looked interested, as well.

"Precisely." Simpson nodded. "Timberclads should be survivable against seventeenth-century artillery. After all, they stood up reasonably well against nineteenth-century field artillery at the beginning of the Civil War, didn't they?"

"Yeah," Eddie admitted. "Of course," he added in a more challenging tone, "they retired the timberclads as soon as they could, didn't they?"

"Actually, they continued to use them throughout the war," Simpson disagreed. "Once they'd developed the capability—and had the time—to build better designed, more heavily armored vessels, they did build all of them they could. But the existing timberclads continued to serve in supporting roles until the very end of the war. And our problem, Mr. Cantrell, is that we're going to begin with the ability

to build a very limited number of heavily armored units—by seventeenth-century standards, at least—but we're not going to be able to develop the infrastructure to build any *more* of them for quite some time. 'Building down,' I believe the President calls it, and rightly so. Which means that in order to project force as broadly as we're going to need to project it, we're going to have to accept the units we can actually build to do it with." He shrugged. "Timberclads should just about fill the bill."

"He's got a point, Eddie," Haygood put in. "A pretty good one, in fact. Timberclads may not be as good as 'proper' ironclads, but they'll kick the ass of any seventeenth-century 'warship' they run into. At least on a one-to-one basis."

Eddie turned the thought over in his brain, pondering it from several angles. And then, after a moment, he felt himself beginning to nod.

"You're right," he said. "I guess maybe I did get a bit too fixated on building the *Benton* or the *Tennessee*," he admitted in a chastened tone. "It's not like we're going to have to run the batteries at Vicksburg or anything anytime soon, is it?"

"Probably not," Simpson agreed. "Not, at least, in terms of facing concentrations of true heavy artillery. But don't look so downhearted, Mr. Cantrell. Timberclads should serve adequately in many instances, but there *will* be cases where properly designed, well-armored ships with heavy artillery are required, as well. In fact, the timberclads' actual function will probably be to carry out routine patrols and shipping protection. When it comes to an actual standup fight with a properly emplaced battery or fort, their job will be to back the ironclads up rather than get into the thick of it themselves."

He sounded almost as if he were genuinely trying to cheer Eddie up, although the teenager found the possibility unlikely.

"In the meantime, Dietrich," the older man continued, turning back to their guide, "I believe you're probably right about the basic suitability of the site. I'd like to get a little more of the river bank, if we can, and I'm going to need enough area running back away from the river for the yard facilities themselves and for barracks and a drill field, as well."

"And eventually, at least, we're going to want someplace to put a decent drydock," Haygood put in, as enthusiastically as if the idea of a naval shipyard had been his own brainchild from the beginning, and Simpson nodded without looking away from Schwanhausser.

"That is probably possible, Herr Simpson," the German said thoughtfully. "It may be expensive," he warned.

"I suspect that if Gustav Adolf asks them politely, whoever owns it will be willing to be reasonable," Simpson said dryly, and Schwanhausser chuckled.

"I imagine they might," he agreed.

"Good." Simpson glanced up at the sun, and then down at his watch. It was an expensive electric job which, unlike most of the battery-powered watches in Grantville, continued to tick smoothly along. At first, Eddie had wondered if Simpson were buying additional batteries on the black market, but he'd been forced to give up that cherished suspicion when he realized that it was one of the kinetic-powered ones which used the wearer's motion to recharge its built in capacitor. Which meant, of course, that John Chandler Simpson possessed a modern watch which might run for decades yet.

Not that anyone needed a watch to guess what was on his mind just now, Eddie thought. The sun was settling steadily lower in the west in a funeral pyre of red and gold cloud.

"I suppose we should be getting back to our quarters," Simpson remarked, then grimaced. "I don't imagine the street lights are going to be very bright around here after dark."

"No," Schwanhausser agreed, and glanced back and forth between the three up-timers. "In fact," he continued after a moment in a diffident tone, "the truth is that it isn't always safe for Americans to move about after dark."

"It isn't?" Simpson asked, and the German shook his head. The up-timer glanced at Haygood, but from the engineer's expression he didn't know any more about the local situation than Simpson and Eddie did, and the ex-industrialist looked back at Schwanhausser. "Is that simply because the local criminal

element finds the lack of lighting . . . congenial to its efforts?" he asked. "Or is there some specific reason why *Americans* in particular should be on their guard?"

"It—" Schwanhausser began, then paused.

"Much of it probably is no more than desperation, darkness, and opportunity, Herr Simpson," he continued after a moment. "Even with all of the construction jobs here in the city, some remain who have no means of support. Some of those who lack work do, however, have families. We have enough criminals even without those circumstances, of course, but it has been much worse than usual this past winter. Armies, battles, and devastation do not contribute to social tranquility, after all.

"On the other hand, that situation seems to be improving now that spring is here and the pace of construction has picked up still further. But I fear that there is another danger, one I have not yet been able to convince Herr McDougal to take sufficiently seriously."

"Which is?" Simpson asked.

"*Richelieu*," Schwanhausser half-snarled, and his head swiveled as if he were peering about for assassins. "Do not, whatever you do, underestimate that Frenchman, Herr Simpson! You and the other Americans are the greatest threat he faces, and he knows it well. Did he not attempt to murder your very children because he knew it?"

Simpson nodded slowly, and Eddie felt a chill which owed very little to the approach of night run down his spine.

"Well, then," Schwanhausser said, returning Simpson's nod. "Be warned. There are rumors of assassins and prices on American heads. No doubt such rumors would abound, whatever the truth behind them, of course. That is Herr McDougal's opinion, at least, and there is probably some reason in it. Yet I do not think that they are *only* rumors this time."

* * *

"That it," Alf Harrison announced, tipping back in his chair in front of the radio.

"Thank you," Simpson said. He was standing behind Harrison, unable to see his expression, but Eddie saw the radio operator roll his eyes. None of McDougal's staff liked the industrialist one bit. Of course, all of them were Stearns loyalists, and most of them had been solid union members before the Ring of Fire, which created two perfectly good reasons for their attitude right there. Simpson couldn't have been unaware of it, but he certainly didn't act as if he were, and Eddie wondered whether that was out of a sense of towering superiority which refused to acknowledge the slings and arrows of his social inferiors. That was what he'd written it down as at first, but he was beginning to question his initial assumptions. He didn't much care for that, because he liked things nice and clear, and he preferred for the people about him to remain if not predictable, at least consistent. The thought that there might be rather more to John Chandler Simpson than he'd assumed was particularly unpalatable, especially given the unmitigated jerk Simpson had shown himself to be during the immediate aftermath of their arrival in Thuringia.

Eddie wasn't entirely certain why he found the idea so distasteful. Well, he knew part of the reason—he didn't like Simpson, and he hated the very thought of finding something about the man to respect. The ingrained suspicion and hostility which were part of Eddie's self-identification as one of Mike Stearns' men undoubtedly played their parts, as well, he admitted frankly, yet he suspected that there was more to it even than that.

Maybe what it really came down to was that he'd never before encountered the combination in a single person of truly superior abilities with the capacity to make truly enormous mistakes. Intellectually, Eddie knew it was entirely possible for something like that to happen, but he'd never personally experienced it, and it was an affront to his teenager's sense of absolute right and absolute wrong. Worse, it made him wonder if *he* might be equally capable of screwing the pooch. Not a pleasant possibility at all, that!

"Will the commo link be manned all night?" Simpson asked after a moment.

"Well, yeah," Harrison replied. "Course there's not much chance Mike—I mean, the President—is

gonna be seeing this before sometime tomorrow morning." His voice was somewhat elaborately patient, although no one could quite have called it overtly discourteous.

"I didn't expect that he would," Simpson said calmly. "I was asking for future information, Mr. Harrison. If this project goes forward, I'll need twenty-four-hour communications capability, and I was simply wondering if it already existed."

"Oh." Harrison had the grace to blush slightly, but he didn't go overboard about it. "Yeah," he said in a much closer to normal tone, "we've got round-the-clock coverage. It's not like being able to pick up your cell phone, but we can usually get the message through without too much delay."

"Excellent," Simpson said, and nodded to him. "Come along, Mr. Cantrell," he said then, and stepped out of the radio room and headed back up the short hall towards McDougal's office.

He was finally showing at least some signs of fatigue, Eddie noticed, although they were still minor enough most people wouldn't have noticed at all. Nothing more than a slight limp on the right side—something even Eddie wouldn't have noted if he hadn't been following Simpson, Haygood, and Schwanhausser around all day.

"What do you think about the possibilities?" he asked as he followed the older man down the hall. He hadn't seen the four-page, handwritten draft of the message Harrison had just transmitted back to Grantville for Simpson.

"I think . . . I think it's possible, Mr. Cantrell," Simpson replied after only the briefest pause, then stopped just outside McDougal's office and turned to face Eddie.

"I don't say that I think it will be *easy*, you understand," he continued. "But assuming that the President is as successful as usual in prying the necessary resources out of the Allocations Committee, and assuming that Gustav Adolf supports this as enthusiastically as I certainly expect him to and that Mr. Haygood's services are made available to us, initially at least, then I believe it should be entirely possible to set up our navy yard here in Magdeburg. Shipping all of the materials we'll need from Grantville will be a royal pain in the ass, of course, but I don't see how we could realistically expect to be able to build and launch them very much up-river from here. And the river itself is going to require quite a bit of improvement before we can move them freely, even operating from here instead of Halle."

"But you think the idea itself is really practical?" Eddie asked.

"Yes, Mr. Cantrell, I do," Simpson told him with a slight smile which, for some reason, made Eddie feel unexpectedly good. "Mind you, I can see quite a few aspects of your initial proposal which are going to require some . . . refinement, shall we say? But overall, I believe that it's not only a practical idea, but a good one."

"Does that mean you're gonna take the job?" Eddie demanded with an edge of lingering suspicion.

"Let's just say," Simpson said, "that my participation in the project is something of a prerequisite if it's going to succeed." He smiled again, ever so thinly, as Eddie stiffened. "Of course it is, Mr. Cantrell," he chided. "Or were you under the misapprehension that there was anyone else in Grantville who'd have even a clue as to how to make this work?"

It was truly remarkable, Eddie reflected as the ex-industrialist resumed his progress towards McDougal's office, how easily Simpson could go from making him feel obscurely pleased to absolutely infuriated with only two simple sentences.

Nor was Simpson finished infuriating people for the evening, either, the teenager discovered a few moments later.

McDougal looked up with something less than total enthusiasm as Simpson led Eddie back into his office.

"Is there something else I can do for you?" he asked.

"Actually, there is," Simpson told him, seating himself in one of the chairs facing McDougal's desk. Eddie started to sit in the other chair, then stopped. Sitting beside Simpson might seem to be ranging himself with the outsider against McDougal, so he chose to stand, leaning against the wall, instead.

"Oh?" McDougal sat back in his chair, his expression wary as Simpson's tone registered.

"I wanted to ask you about something Mr. Schwanhausser mentioned to me earlier this evening," Simpson said. "He advised us to be cautious about our movements."

"Not that again!" McDougal sighed, then shook his head wearily. "Was Dietrich bending your ear about Richelieu again?" he asked.

"As a matter of fact, he was."

"Well, he's just a little bit loony on the topic," McDougal said. He shrugged. "I guess it's not too surprising, really. He did lose most of his family when Tilly burned Magdeburg. A lot of the locals got pretty paranoid after that happened. Now they see murderers and assassins hiding in every alley, and of course the only person who could be sending them is Richelieu."

"So you don't think there's anything to his fears?"

"That Richelieu is sending assassins to Magdeburg? No, I don't think there's anything to that. And if he were sending them here at all, he'd be sending them after Gustav Adolf, not us. Which doesn't mean that there isn't enough 'street crime' here in Magdeburg to make it smart to stay alert."

"Have any of our people—up-timers, I mean—been attacked?"

"Jim Ennis got knifed about a week ago. Hurt pretty bad, in fact, though it looks like he's going to recover fully," McDougal said. Simpson looked at him sharply, and McDougal shrugged again. "Lucky for him, one of the Swedish patrols was passing through and heard him scream. He managed to run for it after the one stab, and the thief gave up and disappeared back down the alley when he saw the patrol. The bastard got Jim's wallet and his pocket watch first, though. Big windup railroad model, too, not battery-powered."

"So you think it was a robbery? A mugging?"

"What else could it have been? The guy demanded Jim's wallet and his 'jewels,' then stuck a knife in him. Sounds like a robbery to me." McDougal sounded a bit impatient, and Simpson snorted.

"Doesn't it seem just a bit odd to you that he stabbed this Ennis *after* getting what he'd come for?" McDougal looked blank, and Simpson shook his head. "I assume from what you just said that your Mr. Ennis gave the 'robber' what he'd demanded instead of trying to resist?"

"Damn straight he did," McDougal replied. "Jim's about fifty years old, and the first thing he knew about it was when he stepped around the corner and the bastard showed him the knife! What the hell would *you* have done in his position?"

"Quite possibly exactly the same thing," Simpson said. "But my point is that he did what this 'thief' of yours told him to. He handed over what the man wanted and didn't resist. And the 'robber' still chose to stab him. You said the Swedish patrol heard him 'scream,' not 'shout for help,' so I'm assuming that he hadn't even tried to summon assistance before he was stabbed."

"This isn't the twenty-first century," McDougal pointed out. "There isn't exactly a cop on every street corner, and there *are* some real hardcases and badasses hanging around here. Some of them would cut your throat for a nickel."

"I don't doubt it. For that matter, there were plenty of places back home where people would have cut your throat just as cheerfully for even less. But usually, Mr. McDougal—*usually*, I say—even around here thieves don't go around murdering people just for the hell of it. I'm perfectly well aware that there are exceptions to the rule. But it's still just a bit unusual, I'd think, for someone who's been able to get everything he demanded with only the threat of violence to go ahead and murder the person who gave it to him."

"Like I say, it's a rough neighborhood," McDougal replied. "People get knifed all the time, sometimes for no reason at all."

"Actually, people very seldom get knifed 'for no reason at all,'" Simpson disagreed. "There's always *some* reason for it."

"Maybe so, but there must have been dozens of locals who've gotten robbed, beaten up, or stabbed in the last two or three months, compared to a single up-timer."

"On the other hand," Simpson pointed out, "there aren't simply dozens of locals for each up-timer in

Magdeburg, Mr. McDougal. There are thousands of them. Statistically, Americans—excuse me, up-timers—represent an extremely small sample of the total population. So if this was no more than a random street crime, the odds against the thief picking one of the literal handful of up-timers in Magdeburg must have been quite high, don't you think?"

"Look," McDougal said, "why don't you come right out and say whatever it is your driving at, Simpson. What? You think I'm just been sitting here on my ass ignoring some sort of master plot against all Americans everywhere? Is that it? You're accusing me of not doing my job?"

"I didn't say that," Simpson replied. "In fact, all I intended to do was to suggest to you that Dieter might have a point. Of course it's possible that Mr. Ennis was simply the victim of an armed robber with a particularly vicious temper. But it's also possible that the entire object was to make an assassination *look* like a robbery. That was all I came in here to suggest. On the other hand, now that you ask, and after hearing your reaction to my questions and my suggestion that you might want to be just a little open-minded on the question, I have to say that, yes, it does sound to me like you've been sitting on your ass—or maybe your brain—where this particular possibility is concerned."

"Listen, you—" McDougal began furiously, but Simpson only shook his head and stood.

"I didn't come in here to argue with you, McDougal. I came in here to try to get you to think. Obviously, whatever your other virtues—and I'm sure they're legion—may be, thinking isn't one of them. You do remember, as Dieter himself reminded me just this afternoon, that it was Richelieu who ordered the attack on the high school? The high school in which *your* children were students? Why do you think he did that? Richelieu is capable of total ruthlessness, but the man isn't a complete psychotic, you know. He attacked the school because of what it represents, and what it represents is *knowledge*. The information Gustav Adolf needs and that Richelieu fears even more than he does the Spanish Habsburgs. Well, he didn't get the high school, and he didn't manage to kill all of your teachers and all of your children in one fell swoop, but that's not the only place knowledge is locked up, is it? It's also walking around inside the brain of every single up-timer. And do you seriously think that Richelieu isn't perfectly capable of and willing to attempt to eliminate as many of those brains as he can?"

McDougal stared at him, jaw clenched, and Simpson snorted.

"Apparently you do. Well, I hope the people responsible for keeping your President alive are a bit more willing to think the unthinkable than you appear to be. I may not be one of his greatest admirers, but if I were Richelieu, the only person I'd want dead right now even more badly than I wanted Gustav Adolf that way would be Mike Stearns. You might want to pass that assessment along to him."

Simpson's voice was desert-dry, and McDougal's jaw unlocked enough to drop ever so slightly. Simpson observed the phenomenon and produced another snort, then glanced at Eddie.

"Come along, Mr. Cantrell. I'd like to find some supper before we turn in for the evening."

* * *

Dinner was quite probably the best meal Eddie had eaten since leaving Grantville. In fact, it was in the running for the best meal he'd had since the Ring of Fire, period. The "restaurant" was little more than a very large tent—or, at least, a tarp stretched across two-and-a-fraction walls of what would someday be a proper restaurant but which was currently still under construction. At least the kitchens seemed to be complete, and The Crown and Eagle Bar and Grill was obviously the establishment of choice for both the Americans—Haygood was already there when they arrived—and many of the Swedish officers stationed in Magdeburg.

The name was a nice touch, Eddie thought, and he rather suspected that The Crown and Eagle was a franchise of the owners of the Thuringen Gardens back in Grantville. It wouldn't be surprising, since everyone knew Gustav Adolf was planning to make Magdeburg his new imperial capital in Germany. The city was already a "boom town," and the boom was just getting underway. There was certainly something very up-time about the choice of names, and he recognized two of the bouncers from the Gardens. The food was just as good, too, and he tucked into the steak Simpson had decided to treat both of them to.

There were times when Eddie missed the twenty-first century with excruciating poignancy, and

memories of food had a tendency to bring them on. No pre-Ring of Fire American had been even remotely prepared for the change in diet imposed by their transition to the seventeenth century. It wasn't just the esoteric or "modern" foods they missed, either. It was the fact that the entire food distribution system, and the food *production* system, as well, was so damned limited compared to the one they'd grown up with. Steak, for example. It was generally available, but it cost an arm and a leg. Or corn-on-the-cob. They were lucky as hell that they'd had seed corn available when they were kicked back in time, but there hadn't been enough of it. Almost every kernel they'd been able to produce in the shortened growing season they'd enjoyed after arriving in Thuringia had gone right back into seeds, rather than onto people's tables. And tomatoes. Or avocados. God, Eddie had never imagined that he would have been willing to contemplate homicide for a couple of scoops of guacamole!

But at least The Crown and Eagle's cooks knew how to do justice to one of their extraordinarily expensive T-bones . . . unlike the cooks in the inns in which he and Simpson had stayed or dined on their journey to Magdeburg. Most of *them* had figured that the only way to cook beef was to boil it into a consistency which would have made decent cavalry boots. This steak, on the other hand, was done to medium-rare perfection (over an open-fire grill, of course!) and served up with nicely sauteed mushrooms, and a salad of very early bibb lettuce (courtesy of the up-timers) with a vinaigrette dressing.

There was even, wonder of wonders, a baked potato. Potatoes had already been introduced in large parts of Germany before the Ring of Fire—to Eddie's surprise, since he knew that Frederick the Great had had to force them onto Prussia in the next century—but they were still something of a rarity. Of course, once he reflected upon the matter, it made sense that The Crown and Eagle would serve them, given that so much of the establishment's popularity stemmed from its "American cuisine."

Eddie luxuriated in all of them with shameless hedonism. In fact, it was quite some time before he was able to tear himself sufficiently away from gastronomic considerations to pay much attention to whatever else was going on about him.

". . . so the point, you see," Simpson was saying to a pock-faced Scotsman who was obviously one of Gustav Adolf's officers, "is to eventually completely eliminate the pike from the battlefield."

"Och, mon, you're daft!" the Scotsman declared. "There's never a day musketeers could stop a hard charge of well-trained pikes without pikes of their own." He shook his head and thumped his beer tankard on the rough-planked table. "The King's already increased his proportion of shot to pikes to two-to-one, and that's higher than any of these stinking Imperialists. But any more than that, and we've nothing to stop t'*other* side's pikes with, and there's an end to it. It might be that if all our 'new weapons' could fire as fast as *yours* can there might be something in it, but they're not going to be able to, are they now?"

"I'm not sure exactly what sort of firearms are being considered, actually," Simpson admitted, and looked down the table at Haygood. "Mr. Haygood? Do you?"

"No, not really," the engineer replied after washing down a mouthful with a healthy swig of beer. "I understand that they're still debating the advantages of flintlocks and caplocks. I know which one *I'd* prefer, but the manufacturing end isn't my kind of engineering, and I've been kind of busy with other projects, I'm afraid. So far, I don't think anyone's even suggested the possibility of a breechloader."

"Given the difficulties in manufacturing proper cartridges—and, for that matter, fulminating powder and primer caps—I'd assume that you're going to be looking at muzzle-loaders of some sort, at best," Simpson agreed, and turned back to the Scotsman.

"I'm guessing that they'll probably be flintlocks, but the designs should include cylindrical iron ramrods and conical touchholes. In that case, your rate of fire is going to be considerably higher than it is right now, but you're right that it's never going to match that of up-time weapons. I'm sure that plans are already afoot to provide you with rifles, which will let you open fire effectively at greater ranges, so you'll generally have longer to shoot at an attacking enemy, but that certainly isn't enough by itself to guarantee that you can stop a determined charge.

"But you're missing at least part of the point, Captain. If you eliminate the pikes, then you can take

the pikemen and issue all of *them* rifles—muskets, if you prefer—as well. And if your entire army is equipped with rifles and bayonets . . ." He paused. "Ah, they did mention bayonets to you, didn't they?" he asked.

"You mean that wee silly knife they're talking about hanging on the end of a musket?" The Scotsman shrugged. "Och, and won't *that* be useful against some bastard with a twelve-foot pike!"

"That 'wee silly knife' will be a lot more useful than you think, especially if your troops are trained with them," Haygood interjected. The Scotsman looked skeptical, and Haygood showed his teeth in a thin smile. "What happens when somebody gets inside your reach with a shorter, handier weapon?" he challenged. "Say, someone with a knife who blocks your sword to one side while he rams it into your belly?"

The Scotsman blinked, and it was Haygood's turn to shrug.

"Trust me, properly used, a bayoneted rifle is *very* effective in close combat. As it happens, I'm one of the very few up-timers who's had actual experience with the kind of weapons and tactics Mr. Simpson's talking about." He did not, Eddie noticed, explain that his "actual experience" was that of a hobbyist, and the Scotsman frowned.

"Mr. Haygood is correct," Simpson said. "For all practical purposes, bayonets will turn every single man in your entire army into a pikeman, if he's needed. And in the meantime, if *all* of your infantry are musket-armed and trained and disciplined to employ those muskets in mass fire that's properly timed, not very many pike formations are going to be able to close with them."

The Scotsman looked more thoughtful, but it was clear that acceptance still ran a distant second—or third—to skepticism, and Simpson cocked his head.

"Suppose that I gave your musketeers weapons that could open aimed fire at a range of, say, three hundred paces and expect to hit man-sized targets at that distance. And that I got their rate of fire up to four shots a minute, at the same time," he suggested after a moment. "And suppose that your army had nine thousand men in it, and that I organized them into three firing lines, each three thousand men long. And then suppose that I organized your musketeers into ninety-six-man companies, each composed of three thirty-two-man 'platoons,' and trained them to fire by half-platoons."

The Scotsman was staring at Simpson, his eyes almost crossed as he tried to follow what the American was saying.

"All right, now," Simpson continued. "If you've got three thousand men in each line, then that means that each line consists of thirty-one companies, or ninety-three platoons, or a total between all three lines of sixty-three companies and . . . two-hundred and seventy-nine platoons, right?"

The sandbagged-looking Scotsman nodded, obviously prepared to let the up-timer do the mathematical heavy lifting, and Simpson shrugged.

"Well, the math is actually pretty simple. If your musketeers can fire four times every minute, then the total reload cycle for each man in your formation is approximately fifteen seconds. So if half of each platoon in your first line fires, and then two and a half seconds later the second half of each platoon in the first line fires, and then two and a half seconds after *that* half of each platoon in your *second* line fires, and so on, your nine thousand men are going to be sending the next best thing to fifteen hundred rounds down-range every two and a half seconds. That's almost *thirty-six thousand* rounds per minute."

The Scotsman's eyes weren't crossed now—indeed, they were almost bulging, and Simpson shrugged again.

"But the total numbers don't begin to tell the entire tale, do they?" he inquired mildly. "Remember, fifteen hundred of them are going to be arriving every *two and a half seconds*. Effectively, there will be a continuous, unbroken wall of bullets pouring into any pike block foolish enough to try to close with your formation, which I should think would have at least a tiny bit of an effect on its morale. Obviously you've seen a battlefield or two of your own. How well do you think a formation of pikes would do when it came to holding its ranks and carrying through with an effective charge under those circumstances?"

"Carrying *through*?" The Scotsman shook his head as if he'd just been punched. "Mother of God,

mon! If you're telling the truth about the range of these 'rifles' of yours, then it would take a good three minutes—at least!—under fire for the pikes to close, and that would mean—"

"That would mean that they were trying to charge through over one hundred thousand rounds of continuous fire," Simpson said, once again doing the math for him obligingly. "So if there were nine thousand pikemen, and if one third of the shots your men fired actually hit, you'd kill each of them about four times."

The American smiled thinly, and raised one hand, palm uppermost.

"Of course, that's under perfect conditions. It assumes that the terrain lets you see the target and begin engaging it at extended range, and that your rate of fire isn't affected by something like rain, barrel fouling, or something like that. And once the firing begins, smoke alone is going to cause individual accuracy to drop off pretty severely. But I think you see my point?"

"Aye, you might be saying that," the Scotsman said, and looked at Haygood, as if seeking additional confirmation of Simpson's claims.

"Mr. Simpson's description isn't exactly the one I would have used," the engineer said. "It sounds more like what the Brits did to the French during the Napoleonic wars than the sort of tactics I'm trained in. Of course, most of the differences are because the ones he's talking about would make the kind of tactics you're accustomed to downright suicidal. Which is why we developed better ones which were even more effective. Mr. Simpson's example was hypothetical, but in the up-time American Civil War, a battle was fought—*would* have been fought—with weapons very similar to the ones he's describing, about a hundred and thirty years from now at a place called Chickamauga, and in just two days, the two sides suffered over thirty-seven thousand casualties. And at the Battle of Antietam, in the same war, the two sides suffered twenty-two thousand casualties in a *single* day."

It was obvious to Eddie that no one had ever explained it to the Scotsman the way Simpson and Haygood just had—certainly not with the *numbers* the two of them had produced—and the officer stared at the Americans for two or three more seconds before he drained his tankard. Then he waved it at one of the barmaids for a refill and turned back to Simpson.

"And what other evil little surprises would you be suggesting?" he asked, leaning his forearms on the table and gazing at the American intently.

* * *

It was well past midnight before Simpson, Haygood and Eddie left The Crown and Eagle. Many of the Swedish officers who'd helped fill the restaurant had been thoroughly standoffish when they first arrived—no doubt because Simpson's reputation as an anti-German and anti-Swedish bigot had preceded him. Despite that, however, most of them had been listening when he began his discussion with the pock-faced Scotsman. And whatever his other faults might have been, it seemed that John Simpson had a definite gift for getting at the heart—or, at least, the nuts and bolts—of an explanation.

Even Eddie, with his wargamer's fascination with military history, wouldn't have thought of breaking down the numbers the way Simpson had. He would have just waved his hands and insisted that the weight of fire would have been sufficient to break the enemy's charge. Which would have overlooked the fact that the members of his audience, whatever theoretical faith they might have in Americans' technical ingenuity, were basing their understanding of what he was saying on their actual experience with matchlocks. No wonder they'd had such serious reservations about the possibilities!

But once Simpson had gotten the actual numbers across to them—and once the notion that Haygood really knew what he was talking about had percolated through their brains—virtually every officer in the restaurant had started easing closer and closer to the table the three Americans shared. And as they'd closed in, they'd begun to ask other questions, as well. *Lots* of other questions.

Simpson had done his best to answer those questions, and somehow Eddie hadn't been as surprised as he once would have been when Simpson frankly admitted, from time to time, that he didn't *know* an answer. When that happened, Haygood usually did, although there were times when even he had to admit he was stumped. Two or three times, Simpson actually turned to Eddie, drawing the

younger man into the conversation when he rightly suspected that the question was the sort a war game enthusiast might know how to answer. But there was a difference between the explanations Eddie gave and those Simpson provided. Indeed, there was a difference between the answers that came from Simpson and those which came from Haygood, as well, and as Eddie listened to the older man, he knew what that difference was . . . and why it convinced Gustav Adolf's officers to listen so intently to the ex-Navy officer.

Experience. John Simpson had never served in the howling chaos of a seventeenth-century battlefield, yet there was something about his voice and manner, an assurance that he knew what he was talking about from personal, first-hand experience when he explained things to the hard-bitten officers of the Swedish Army. Not, perhaps, the same experience as their own, but experience nonetheless.

They kept him talking for hours before they let him go. And when they finally did let him take his leave, it was with nods of mutual respect unlike anything Simpson had ever seen in Grantville itself, before *or* after the Ring of Fire.

It would have taken a superman not to have been pleased and flattered by such a reception, and whatever else he might have been, John Simpson Chandler was *not* a superman. The after-supper discussion had to have been the most enjoyable single evening he'd spent since arriving as a less than eager guest for his son's wedding, and it showed. He was never going to be an expressive man, Eddie realized, yet there was a new liveliness in his voice and eyes as the two of them finally gathered up a Haygood who'd apparently had a beer or two too many and headed towards their quarters in the boardinghouse where McDougal had rented rooms for them.

It was blacker than the pits of Hell outside the restaurant. Eddie remembered how Mr. Ferrara had once complained, before the Ring of Fire, about light pollution and how it interfered with observations on their astronomy field trips even in rural West Virginia, but he hadn't really understood at the time. Not the way he did now.

Not even the endless months of the winter just past could have prepared him for the darkness which enveloped the one vast construction site which was Magdeburg. Dark as those winter nights had seemed at the time, Grantville at least still had electricity. Light bulbs were one of the items which had fallen under strict rationing controls as yet one more utterly irreplaceable twenty-first-century resource which had been taken completely for granted before the Ring of Fire. Because of that rationing, Grantville's homes and businesses and public places had seemed woefully dimly lit to up-timer eyes.

Compared to Magdeburg at midnight, however, Grantville at its dimmest had been lit up like downtown Las Vegas on a Saturday night. The inky blackness of the muddy streets and alleys between the half-completed walls of the buildings was broken only by occasional—*very* occasional—torches or lanterns. In many ways, the widely scattered pinpricks of light only made the darkness even denser by comparison, and Eddie buttoned his denim jacket against a chill night breeze as he followed Simpson out of the restaurant. Simpson, on the other hand, actually unzipped his light windbreaker, as if he welcomed the briskness.

It would have been easy to become hopelessly lost amid all of the heaps of brick, timbers, and other building materials, but they didn't have all that far to go. Besides, dark and confusing as most of the city might be, Pete McDougal had insisted that the United States' official headquarters had to be well-lighted—by Magdeburg standards, at least—at all times. That provided a visual beacon they could orient themselves upon, and they moved out briskly (or, at least, as briskly as Haygood's . . . cheerfulness allowed) through the muddy darkness.

Haygood was kind enough to provide them with an enthusiastic, if not particularly tuneful serenade, but Simpson wasn't in a very talkative mood. No doubt he'd used up a month or two of conversation after supper, Eddie reflected just a bit sourly. Eddie didn't feel much more like talking himself, though. He was too busy with his own ruminations, still trying to figure out how he felt about the surprising, apparently contradictory layers of Simpson's personality. And so the two of them trudged along silently through the deserted streets and alleys.

Except that they weren't quite "deserted" after all.

Eddie was so wrapped up in his thoughts that he didn't notice when Simpson abruptly halted. His first inkling that anything out of the ordinary was happening came when he literally ran into the older man's back. It was a much more substantial back than Eddie would have anticipated, and the wiry teenager bounced backward a step and a half from the impact.

"What the hell—?" he began angrily, but before he could complete the question, several things happened at once.

He and Simpson had just entered the faint spill of light from a lantern burning outside an alley mouth. It was the most feeble of illuminations, but clearly it was enough for the three men who'd been waiting in the alley to identify them. Eddie knew it was, although it took him two or three precious seconds to realize the fact.

"There!" someone hissed in German. "That's them—*get them!*"

Eddie was still gaping, trying to get a handle on what was happening, when he saw the gleam of naked steel and three burly figures coming straight for him. Confusion barely had time to begin giving way to fear and the beginning of panic as he realized Dieter Schwanhausser had been right to warn them. Whether or not the men in the alley worked directly for Richelieu didn't really matter. What mattered was that all three of them were obviously intent upon shoving a foot or so of knife blade through one Eddie Cantrell.

He opened his mouth to shout for help, even as he stumbled backward another step. But that was as far as he got before a hammer blow of sound smashed his ears like a baseball bat.

The muzzle flash lit up the night like a lightning bolt. Eddie had never before seen a handgun fired in near darkness at very close range, and the brilliant eruption of light stabbed at his eyeballs like a knife. But if it came as a surprise to Eddie, it was far more of a surprise to their assailants.

Eddie heard the beginning of a scream of agony, then cringed as the baseball bat whacked him across the ears again and another stroboscopic blast of light assaulted his optic nerves. But that same flash of light seemed to carve John Simpson out of the darkness, and Eddie saw the nine-millimeter automatic which had materialized magically from somewhere under his unzipped windbreaker.

The city slicker from Pittsburgh had dropped into a half-crouched shooter's stance, with the handgun held two-handed, and the abortive scream of pain was chopped abruptly off as Simpson's second shot hit the lead attacker dead center, just above the collarbone.

One of the other assailants shouted an incredulous curse and lunged desperately forward, but Simpson didn't even shift position. Haygood was just beginning to claw at the revolver holstered at his hip when Simpson fired again—twice, in a quick one-two sequence that punched a pair of bullets into the triangle formed by the would-be killer's forehead and the base of his throat.

That one went down without even a scream, his throat and the back of his neck exploding in a grisly spray, Eddie noticed almost numbly, and the third man hesitated. It was only the briefest of pauses, and Eddie always wondered afterward exactly what the man had thought he was doing. He might even have entertained some notion of throwing down his knife and surrendering, but if that was what he had in mind, he didn't get around to it in time to do him any good.

Simpson's point of aim shifted, and Eddie had a fraction of a second to wonder how the man could possibly see what he was doing after the blinding brilliance of the muzzle flashes. Maybe he was actually closing his eyes—or one of them, at least—as he fired. Eddie didn't have a clue about that, but it didn't really matter, either. The nine-millimeter pistol barked twice more in that same, deadly rhythm. One shot hit the third attacker perhaps an inch above the heart; the second took him squarely above the right eye and slammed him back to slither bonelessly down the alley wall behind him just as Haygood's revolver finally cleared its holster.

Eddie Cantrell stood there, frozen in stunned disbelief. The entire attack couldn't have consumed more than five seconds. Probably less. But in those few heartbeats of time, three men had tried to kill him . . . and the stuffed shirt from Pittsburgh had killed all three of them, instead.

* * *

"Good morning, Mr. Cantrell."

"Uh, good morning," Eddie half-mumbled as Simpson greeted him the following day. The older man sat at the small, rickety table in the tiny "sitting room" of their shared quarters, carefully cleaning a Browning High-Power automatic.

It was the first really good look Eddie had gotten at it, and from the way the bluing was worn away, it was obvious to him that the handgun had seen a lot of use. It was equally obvious that it had been lovingly maintained during its lengthy lifespan, and Eddie wondered how Simpson had managed to conceal it so effectively that Eddie had never even suspected he had it.

"Are you ready for breakfast?" Simpson asked.

"Breakfast?" Eddie repeated, then swallowed heavily, remembering.

"Well, lunch, actually, I suppose," Simpson said thoughtfully, his face expressionless, although there might have been the faintest flicker of amusement in his eyes. If so, Eddie scarcely noticed as his mind replayed the previous night's events.

The sound of the shots, especially so close to the United States' "embassy," had brought two different Swedish patrols at a dead run. Not only that, but the sentries outside the embassy itself had responded almost as quickly, and, unlike the Swedes, they'd brought powerful up-time hand-portable lights with them.

Eddie rather wished they hadn't. He'd seen carnage and bloodshed enough for someone two or three times his age since arriving in Thuringia. He'd been there when Frank Jackson smashed his first Imperial army of mercenaries outside Badenburg and he and Jeff Higgins, Larry Wild, and Jimmy Andersen had faced down a second army of rapists and murderers who'd been their so-called "allies" with nothing but twelve-gauge shotguns and outrage. He'd been there at the Wartburg, too—and at the Alte Veste. Despite his brash, often bubbling exterior, there were nights when nightmares spawned by the memories of those sights and sounds kept him awake, tossing and turning.

But whatever he'd seen, he was scarcely hardened against it, and the sight of what Simpson's shots had done to their targets on the way through had almost cost him his excellent supper.

McDougal himself had appeared on the scene in less than ten minutes, still buttoning his shirt while he stared down at the three twisted, blood-leaking bodies and the wicked looking knives lying beside them in the mud.

"So, Mr. McDougal," Simpson had grated, the harsh anger in his voice the only indication he seemed prepared to allow of his own adrenaline and fear, "do you still think Mr. Schwanhausser is *overreacting* to the possible threat from Richelieu?"

McDougal had flinched visibly from the bitter, biting irony of the question, but he'd only stared down at the bodies for a few more seconds, then shaken his head.

"No," he'd said then, not that he'd had much choice about it. "No, Mr. Simpson. I don't suppose he is."

There'd been quite a bit more after that, of course, before anyone got to bed, and it had been still longer before Eddie managed to drop off to sleep. Which was why he was so late rolling out.

"Uh, yeah," he said, shaking himself out of his thoughts. "I guess I am sorta hungry, at that."

He sounded a bit surprised, even to himself, and Simpson snorted. There was amusement in that snort, but not the harsh, dismissive sort of humor Eddie might once have expected. Indeed, in its own way, it was almost gentle.

"Well, give me a few minutes to finish up here, and I'll treat you to lunch at The Crown and Eagle," the older man said while his hands briskly broke down his cleaning rod and packed it and the other cleaning supplies away, then reassembled the Browning quickly and expertly. Eddie watched him, noting the smoothness of the practiced movements, and dismissed any lingering suspicion that Simpson had borrowed the handgun from someone for the trip.

"You had that all along, didn't you?" he asked after a moment.

"Yes, I did," Simpson agreed, not looking up as he finished reassembling the pistol and slid a freshly

loaded magazine into the grip. "The Browning is an excellent weapon," he observed, "although the nine-millimeter round is a little short on stopping power, compared to something like the .45. On the other hand, with a hundred and forty-seven-grain hollowpoint and about four-point-six grains of HS-6, it will do the job quite adequately."

"I . . . see." Eddie cleared his throat. "How long have you been carrying it?" he asked.

"For considerably longer than you've been alive," Simpson replied, and looked up at last with a slight smile. "There are times, Mr. Cantrell, when one should be a little cautious about leaping to conclusions, don't you think?"

"Yeah," Eddie said slowly, "there are." He paused, meeting Simpson's eyes levelly, then added, "I guess everybody should bear that in mind, shouldn't they?"

"I imagine they should," Simpson agreed after a moment, and something passed between them as the older man met the youngster's gaze equally levelly. Eddie wasn't certain what that "something" was, but he knew both of them had felt it.

Then the moment passed, and Simpson stood. He tucked the Browning away into the worn holster at the small of his back which Eddie had never noticed before, then nodded towards the door.

Eddie nodded back, and the two of them headed off towards The Crown and Eagle. Quite a few people looked at them—and especially Simpson—oddly as they passed, but the older man paid the curious no attention.

"By the way, Mr. Cantrell," he said casually as they approached the restaurant, "while you were sleeping in this morning, I went over to check with Mr. Harrison to see if President Stearns had responded to my message from yesterday."

"Oh?" Eddie glanced at him. Something about Simpson's tone sounded warning signals. "Had he?"

"Yes, he had," Simpson replied. "In fact, he informed me that he's accepted my recommendations and that he and his cabinet have authorized me to call upon Mr. McDougal for assistance in formally acquiring title to the land for our navy yard."

"Our navy yard?" Eddie repeated, and Simpson nodded.

"Yes. We're going to have to return to Grantville, of course. I'll need to spend some time with you and your original plan if we're going to work out a practical design for the ironclads. And we need to discuss with the President how many timberclads we'll need to add to the mix. And, for that matter, exactly what sort of priorities for resources—other than the railroad rails, of course—and manpower the Navy is going to require. And how we're going to organize that manpower and set up training programs."

"Why do you keep saying 'we'?" Eddie asked. Simpson cocked an eyebrow at him, and the youngster shrugged irritably. "I know you're going to tear my design completely apart and put it together all over again," he said. "I accepted that when I first proposed it to Mike—I mean, the President. So, okay, it wasn't a perfect design. I never claimed it was."

"No, it wasn't," Simpson agreed in a coolly judicious tone. "On the other hand, I'm sure we'll have time to work the bugs out of it. After all, it's going to take weeks—probably at least a couple of months—of organizational work before we can get back to Magdeburg and really start setting things up here."

"Dammit, there you go again with that 'we' stuff! Just because Mike sent me along on this first trip doesn't mean I want to spend my time sitting around in this mudhole while they build the city around us!"

"That's unfortunate," Simpson observed. "On the other hand, I'm sure there are a great many people who find themselves compelled to do things they didn't want to."

Eddie stopped dead in the street and turned to face the older man squarely.

"Just go ahead and tell me what you're so pleased about!" he snapped irritably.

"That's 'Tell me what you're so pleased about, *sir*,'" Simpson told him, and Eddie's eyes began to widen in sudden, dreadful surmise.

"I'm afraid so, *Lieutenant* Cantrell," Simpson informed him. "Still, I suppose it's only appropriate that the individual responsible for inspiring his country to build a navy in the first place should find himself

drafted for duty as its very first commissioned officer. Well, second, actually, I suppose," he amended judiciously.

"B-b-but I—I mean, I never— You can't be *serious!*" Eddie blurted out.

"Oh, but I can, Lieutenant," Simpson said coolly, and showed his teeth in the edge of a smile. "Don't worry," he advised, taking Eddie by the elbow and getting him moving once more, "you'll adjust quickly enough, Lieutenant. Oh, and by the way, I imagine you'll adjust even more quickly if you remember to call me 'Admiral' or 'sir' from now on."