



# The Iron Empire

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For everyone on the Infinity Ring team.  
Thank you for making this story come to life.  
— J.D.



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ARISTOTLE STUDIED the black and white stones on the checkered *Petteia* board, wondering if it was a bad idea to beat Plato three times in a row. The man might be the greatest philosopher of all time, but he sure got cranky when he lost at games. And a grumpy Plato was never a good thing.

Trying his best to show a look of deep concentration, Aristotle moved a black stone to a square that opened up an opportunity for his teacher to trap him several turns later.

“Going to let me win, are you?” Plato asked, a stern look of disapproval crinkling his ancient face, half-hidden by a ringlet-filled beard. He leaned back in his chair, stroking that grand bushel of hair hanging from his chin. “Perhaps it’s time for the teacher to become the student, and the student the teacher, when the student must teach the teacher what the teacher ought teach the student.”

Aristotle stared at his master, fighting to keep emotion from his face—fighting the smile that tried to force its way past the whiskers of his own beard. Plato sounded like a philosopher even when he complained about a board game. Several seconds later, after what seemed

like a much longer battle of locking eyes, the two men burst into a fit of laughter that would shock anyone else at the stoic Academy of Plato in Athens, Greece. But after twenty years, they had become much more than a pupil and his instructor. They were friends for life.

"I thought I'd at least give you a chance today," Aristotle said. "A win for you might save a pupil or three from being sent to the kitchens to scrub pots."

"Ah," Plato responded, "but it's there that you make your mistake in the line of logic, my dear student. You should have foreseen that I would spot your plan, which stabs my pride even more than a loss, thereby making for an irascible teacher indeed. You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation."

Aristotle frowned, slightly hurt. "Are you saying that you think less of me, master?"

"Of course not." Plato stood, smoothing out the wrinkles in his tunic. "I'm only reminding you to be wary when you make decisions against an opponent in *Petteia*. Wars have turned on less important matters. Come, let us drink wine and observe the setting of the sun."

"What about . . . ?" Aristotle eyed the board.

"You've tainted the challenge," Plato said. "And learned your lesson. Now, come."

They made their way to a balcony on the west side of the Academy, its view a breathtaking glimpse of Athens and the sea beyond. The sinking sun painted a splash of orange across the thin clouds in the sky, and a salt-tinged

breeze washed across Aristotle. He closed his eyes for a moment, enjoying the taste of life, then sat with his teacher, facing the waning day.

"I want to hear your thoughts on the future," Plato said as he took a sip of diluted wine. "We spend so much time in these halls and courtyards speaking of the past, analyzing the present. But lately my mind has been heavy with contemplating that which has yet to come. The world is experiencing an explosion of knowledge and growth, but what path does it follow? Is the destination one to be desired?"

Aristotle took his own long gulp of the sweet wine. This seemed a deep subject, even for his teacher, the *master* of deep subjects—it would be long into the night before this conversation ended.

"Have I stumped you?" Plato prodded.

"No, teacher. I'm only pausing to gather my thoughts before I say something foolish. It is the mark of an educated man to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it."

"Wise words," Plato responded. "Which is why in my company you can speak as you think, because I will never hold you to your musings. We are here to philosophize, and by accident we may change the very future of which we ponder. Or, likewise, we may spew forth nonsense and go to bed frustrated at the effort. As *my* teacher, Socrates, said before, 'I am the wisest man alive, for I know one thing, and that is that I know nothing.'"

Plato grew silent, and Aristotle knew that the man now

expected his student to start spilling his thoughts. Which he did, finally feeling free to share the peculiar musings he'd pondered many times in the quiet of his room.

"I often wonder if the world is part of a fabric, master. Metaphorically, of course. We do, after all, imagine the Fates as great weavers. Perhaps time is woven in a pattern, then, and there are threads of events *placed* in that pattern in some predetermined sequence. And if there is a design to the reality of the universe, does it follow that it's possible for that reality to be . . . broken? For things to go the way they should not?"

Plato had turned in his chair to look at his pupil, a sense of wonder in his eyes. "Please, do go on. You've captured my attention."

Aristotle knew his teacher was sincere, and he continued with excitement.

"As I study the tomes of our history, a recurring thought always comes to my mind—what if something happened that wasn't supposed to happen? Or what if something *didn't* happen that should have? Is it permanent? Is history permanent? Or can we . . . change it?"

"Change history?" Plato asked. "So much said in so few words. I think you've breasted a topic that in truth frightens me, my pupil. Not in a bad way, mind you. But my foundation trembles."

"No great mind has ever existed without a touch of madness," Aristotle said. "And I do believe that the things I've pondered about our past and future walk the edge of that madness. But by the same token, it

may be the most important notion I've ever had."

Plato nodded slowly, considering. "What is at the crux of this . . . notion?"

"Progress," Aristotle replied. "Technology. On a scale that is beyond even the furthest reaches of our understanding. What if some day our race advances enough that we could actually manipulate time and —"

A rapid flurry of knocks at the door interrupted his words. Plato, his beard seeming a shade darker somehow, reluctantly ordered whomever it was to step onto the balcony. A young boy—his name was Python of Aenus—popped his head in and apologized.

"I'm sorry, master," Python said. "But there is a message from King Philip, sent by horse. I thought you would want to see it."

Plato sighed. "What would Socrates say at a time like this?"

"Be kind," Aristotle provided, "for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle."

"Don't put up airs, pupil." But Plato had the scantest glint of mirth in his eyes—a rarity these days. "Bring it, boy, and then get back to your studies. Tomorrow we will begin the Theory of Forms."

Python quickly handed over the small scroll to his master, then scurried back inside from the balcony, shutting the door behind him. Plato unrolled the parchment and read through its contents, his expression never changing. Aristotle knew better than to pry.

Finally, the scholarch of the Academy of Plato—and

its namesake—looked up, eyeing his student. “Looks like our discussion on the madness of the mind and the ability to change history will have to wait until a later time, my friend.”

“Oh?” Aristotle hoped it wasn’t bad news.

Plato stood, then glanced at the scroll as he spoke. “You’ve been summoned by Philip to tutor his son Alexander the Third. The future king of Macedonia.” Plato looked up once more, a sense of pride behind that beard and those ancient eyes.

Aristotle swallowed, not sure what to think of such a life change. “Alexander the Third? He’s still a boy, still teachable. This might be a wonderful thing.”

“Yes, indeed.” Plato leaned on the railing and watched the dying glow of the sunset. “There are those who say the boy is destined to have . . . *greatness*. It is my sincere hope that you can make sure this is so.”

“Yes, teacher,” Aristotle replied, excited by the prospect. “I will do my best.”





## The Horse's Eyes

“THIS IS the only thing I’ve ever put my foot down about,” Dak said, folding his arms and trying his all-around best to look like a dude who meant what he said and said what he meant. “We’re already here. No changing your minds.”

He faced his best friend—Sera Froste—and his slowly-but-surely-becoming second best friend, Riq Jones. They stood in a dusty, dry alley behind Ford’s Theatre in Washington, DC. The year was 1865, the day April 15, just a few hours from what Dak now considered the darkest moment in all of history. Because his hero of heroes was about to be shot in the head.

He had read all about it in a history book he’d pilfered from 1945. Dak knew Abraham Lincoln as a congressman and lawyer who had spoken out against slavery—and been silenced by the SQ as a result. But when the time travelers had fixed a Break in 1850, they had, in a roundabout way, ensured that the great man would go on to do great things. Dak read all about them.

And he couldn't bear the thought of what came next.

"Have you not learned a thing since we started all this?" Riq asked him. The older boy wasn't being a jerk—even Dak had to admit that the concerns over his plan were pretty valid. But this was Abraham Lincoln. *President* Abraham Lincoln. A once-in-a-lifetime chance lay before them.

Sera had been nodding since the first word popped out of Riq's mouth. "He's right, Dak. You mean a lot to me, and I know this means a lot to you. That's why I let you talk me into coming here. But now . . . we just can't do this. We can't. I'm sorry."

"Yes. We can." It took all of Dak's effort to stay still. Resolute. He wanted to save President Lincoln and that was that.

"And risk everything?" Sera countered. "Throw everything off balance? Create a new Great Break?"

Dak boiled inside. "How can stopping the murder of our greatest president be a Break? It'll only help the world get better!"

"It's not about what events are good or bad," Riq said, "and you know it. It's about a pattern, and that pattern being broken. Making reality unstable. The Hystorians didn't say that Lincoln dying was a Break, therefore him *not* dying might very well *be* a Break."

"It could unravel everything," Sera added.

Dak sighed. They'd just saved the Louvre in France from being sabotaged by Marie Antoinette. Surely

Abraham Lincoln was just as important as a dusty old museum?

"So, it's two against one?" he asked timidly, all his bravado gone. He heard horses clomping out on the main street, and it made him picture the president coming along in his own carriage soon.

"Two against one," Sera agreed. "Good thing we're an odd number so we can't get tied up on decisions. Right?"

"Right," Dak repeated. Then he turned and ran, sprinting down a connecting alley toward the sounds of the horses. Forget democracy this time. He'd talk to Lincoln if it was the last thing he ever did.

Sera shouted his name from behind, and the sound of their footsteps followed. Dak knew he couldn't outrun them, so he had to get a little reckless. He burst out into the main street, where throngs of people and horses and carriages and carts were all in motion. Shouts and curses rang out as he bumped and jostled his way across the road, almost getting clomped by a big black horse whose eyes seemed to say, "Hey, idiot, quit messing with history."

Dak swung around the other side of the horse and rider, and scooted his way down the wooden sidewalk, running past shops and tanneries, a post office. He saw a break in the crowd and sprinted back across the street, toward the entrance of Ford's Theatre, where the nasty deed was going to go down in a few hours. He went for the door, hoping it was open, not caring who was

behind it. No one played hide-and-seek like Dak “the Ghost” Smyth.

The door opened beautifully.

One minute later, Dak was nestled behind a curtain in the back of the theater, sucking in breaths like a hungry hippo.



After an hour of searching, Sera gave up.

“What a goon,” Riq said, leaning back against the wooden siding of a cooper’s shop. “It annoys the heck out of me that I’ve actually started to like that doofus.”

“No one says *doofus* anymore,” Sera answered absently.

“In 1865? Actually, they haven’t *started* saying it yet. Not until around 1960.” Riq smiled. “But it’s a good word. We should say *doofus* more often. Especially when talking about Dak.”

Sera sighed, almost felt tears emerge. *Come on, Dak*, she thought. *Please, please don’t mess everything up.*

A beautiful two-horse carriage made its way down the street toward them, and people along the wooden walkways on both sides of the street were pointing and gawking, whispering to one another furiously. Sera knew who was inside even before the horses stopped right in front of the entrance to Ford’s Theatre.

Despite everything, she stared in wonder as the man Dak had described so reverently—beard, top hat, lankiness, and all—stepped out of the carriage. Abraham Lincoln had arrived.