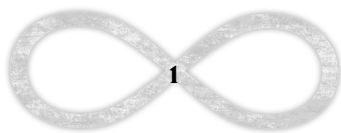




The Iron Empire

James Dashner

SCHOLASTIC INC.



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.