

The Hero's Chamber

**BY
IAN NEWTON**

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Smashwords Edition

Dedications

To Connor, Brandon, and George -
Because you were there when I dreamt it and because I told you I
would.

To my amazing wife Elizabeth -
If you weren't by my side, I never could have finished this
project.

To Gwynn -
For your limitless support and love and for being a zombie.

To Lynn B. -
You're one of a kind and I'm a huge fan.

To Neil, Geddy, and Alex -
If you read between the lines, you'll hear your songs.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Note from the Author

In the early morning hours of July 5th 2006, I woke up from a dream. Since then, I've tried to write down what I experienced; to express what I saw, to tell the story of my dream.

The reason for my effort and the purpose of this book is to get the images, the story, the characters, and the emotions out of my head.

With my dream finally down in print, at least the first half of it, I know that I will be able to put aside the unreasonably detailed visions that have danced through my head for years. After you read it, I hope you understand why I had to write it down.

Ian Newton

July 5th, 2013

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Preface



Frayed Edges

There is a man who's been struck by lightning seven times. He's still alive and in perfect health. The probability of this happening to anyone is one in ten octillion. That's a one with twenty-nine zeroes after it (100,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000). His wife's been struck by lightning too, so that probably adds another zero.

A golfer recently hit ten 'holes in one' in less than four months. The probability of this happening is one in a quintillion. That's a one with eighteen zeroes after it (1,000,000,000,000,000,000).

Two identical snowflakes were found in Wisconsin in 1988. That's one in a nonillion or thirty zeroes (1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000) and did you know that for every person on the planet there is, was, or will be someone else that looks just

like them? I think we all know that just shouldn't be possible no matter how many zeroes come after it.

When these things happen, knowing how virtually impossible they should be, the randomness fades into repetition, and where there is repetition, there is a pattern.

Would it be surprising to learn that your world is like a factory-made dress? It was made from a well-worn pattern that's been used to create the same world over and over.

Like the copies of a dress, the colors vary from the original and sometimes there is a stitch or two out of place. Eventually, the edges of the fabric fray and the rough edges with all their little imperfections are exposed.

If there is any certainty in this reality, it's that there are stitches out of place, the fabric of our world is frayed, and the flaws are becoming more visible as the dress ages.

Of course, it's not possible to look past the frayed edges of this reality to understand why the flaws exist. To do that, there will need to be a close inspection of the original, hand cut, hand stitched item.

Unfortunately, when comparing the original to a copy, the forgotten details, the lower quality materials and all the little alterations only confirm what you already know.

In order to understand the real difference, the one that blurs reality, the original needs to be seen and experienced first-hand as it was intended to be.

It's waiting out there; in the arm of a small spiral galaxy, orbiting an ordinary yellow star on almost the exact opposite side of the universe.

Even from a distance, the blue of the air surrounding it and the even deeper blue of the salty oceans can be seen. There are colorful greens and browns blended onto the surface of the slowly drifting continents and the warmth from its molten core can practically be felt from the cold of space.

From just below cloud level, you can see the busy little people running around. They're just like you and all the other people living on the copies. So much so, they don't even realize where they are or why they might be so important..

Chapter 1



Friends

"I wish it didn't have to be this way," George Weaver said to his son Andrew, reining in the one horse wagon in front of the shabby looking building. Andrew's little face was tear-stained and his eyes were tired and red from a sleepless night of anticipation.

Their friends, Jacob Duncan and his son Connor, sat behind them on the backbench of the old wagon. Connor was in the same condition as Andrew. He had dark circles under his small bloodshot eyes, and there were streaks of dirt across his cheeks from wiping away the tears.

Jacob had his arm around Connor's shoulders, and he hugged his son into his side. Looking down into his eyes, he said, "If there was any other way..." He kissed the boy's small forehead and did his best to keep his emotions under control.

Connor nodded bravely. He knew he couldn't say anything without making the tears start again, and didn't want to walk into that place looking like he'd been crying.

George dropped the reins over the buckboard and hopped out of the wagon. He walked around Duke, the massive black stallion who had pulled them to their destination and came around to Andrew.

"Come on," he said, holding out his arms. "Let's get this over with."

Helping Andrew from the cart, George said, "Come on Connor. Let's get you out of this old wagon. The sooner we get going the sooner we'll be back."

Connor knew better than to object. He and Andrew had already asked all the same questions a hundred times over, and there were no good answers, just "grown up" reasons for things that don't matter and things that don't make sense.

"Thank you, Mr. Weaver, but I can do it myself," Connor said, trying to sound all grown up.

"I'm sorry Connor, I forgot; you're seven now and quite capable."

Mr. Weaver backed away as Connor put his hand on the sideboard. He hopped down to the dirt street, and a little cloud of dust rose up around him.

Walking up the front steps, Andrew stopped and so did everyone else. He asked his father the same question he'd been asking for weeks, hoping for a different answer, "How long until you're back Dad?"

"A couple of months Andrew. It's a long way to the Spire Mountains and the Kingdom, but don't worry. We'll be back before your birthday, I promise."

Connor was standing a couple steps above his father when he flung himself at him and wrapped his arms around his neck.

As the tears broke through his tiny resolve, he begged, "Please don't go, Dad. Please don't leave us here! Please don't go away like Mom did, please don't go!"

Jacob held his son tightly, unsure of what to say.

George had his arms wrapped around Andrew, and he whispered into his ear, "I'll be back before you're seven years old. You'll be safe here, you'll be fine."

The men peeled off their sons and had them stand on the top step of the porch, inspecting them like little soldiers.

"All right," George said to the boys. "Let's wipe away those tears."

Both boys did their best, but it wasn't easy.

"Tuck in those shirts please, boys," Jacob said in a sharp military way.

"That's better," George said to the little men. "Now we've all got a job to do today, tomorrow, and for the next few weeks ahead."

The boys weakly nodded, but at least they were listening.

"Your job," George continued, "is to stay strong, keep to the rules, and no fighting with the other boys. Is that clear?"

They gave a mumbled response.

"Is that clear?" George asked with a more serious tone.

“Yes sir,” came the timid response.

“Not good enough Georgey,” Jacob critiqued.

George looked at his son and Connor with a critical eye and straightened his back like a soldier coming to attention.

With short, crisp words, he demanded, “Is that clear?!”

This time, both boys lifted their chins, stuck out their little chests, and bravely offered, “Yes sir!”

“That’s much better,” George said, without moving from his stiff stance, “Now then, while you’re off doing your jobs we will be doing ours. As you both know our job is difficult and dangerous, but nobody ever said saving the world would be easy!”

Andrew and Connor smiled at their fathers, embracing their new resolve.

“That’s more like it,” Jacob said to the boys. “Now let’s get in there and make the best of this.”

With that, they all marched into the orphanage.

Over the days and weeks that followed, Andrew and Connor obsessed over what it would be like when their fathers had saved the world. Their visions and dreams were the stuff of childhood fantasy, and their fathers were the heroes of legend.

Inevitably, they confided to the other children at the orphanage that they were not really orphans at all. Instead, they told their new friends they were just biding their time until the world was saved, then everyone would see the truth of it.

On the evening of Andrew’s seventh birthday, he and Connor were eating supper with all the other boys at the long common table in the orphanage. Matthew, an older boy, was sitting next to Andrew, and whispered, “He’s never coming back to get you.”

“What did you say?!” Andrew asked.

Connor looked around Andrew, and asked, “Yeah, what did you just say?!”

“You heard me,” Matthew said with a sneer. “You two are stuck here just like the rest of us. Nobody’s coming back for you.”

Andrew turned to look at Connor, but he was already off the bench and moving behind Matthew. Matthew tried to stand, but Connor grabbed the back of his shirt collar, pulled him to the floor, and started to deliver a merciless beating.

Just as the dining hall exploded with commotion, the cook and headmaster walked in holding a small cake with seven lit candles.

For Andrew, Connor, and Matthew supper was over. There was no cake for Andrew. There was no happy birthday song. There was no special moment. What Andrew got for his seventh birthday was a month worth of extra chores and a lifetime of disappointment.

After eight long years at the orphanage, when Connor was fifteen and Andrew was fourteen, they left and never looked back. They did their best to survive on their own; sleeping wherever they could find shelter and eating whatever they could beg, borrow or steal.

By the summer of their third year outside of the orphanage, the boys had wandered far enough that none of the villages or towns they visited were familiar to them. Under the oppressive heat of the summer sun, they walked a dusty road until it gave way to cobblestones.

"We're coming up on a town," Andrew said, stopping in the middle of the road.

"If they've got cobblestone starting all the way out here, it must be a pretty good sized one too," Connor said, stopping next to Andrew.

"If they've got a gate, and they probably will, I don't think we should try to make it past the watchman looking like this."

"I look great! What are you talking about? Besides I'm starving, let's just give it a shot and see what happens," Connor coaxed.

"You're filthy and so am I. We've been walking these dirt roads for a week now, and they're never going to believe we've come to visit anyone in their big old fancy town looking like this."

Connor went to run his fingers through his dirty blond hair, but he couldn't push them in all the way. He tugged a little getting them back out and wiped the back of his hand across his forehead. The grit and grime covering him from head to toe rubbed against his sweaty skin leaving a smudge.

Andrew motioned toward Connor's head, and said, "You made a clean spot."

Connor self-consciously rubbed at his forehead.

"If I look half as dirty as you do, I can't even imagine how bad we must smell. Unless you've got some better excuse to get past the town gates, I think we should go get cleaned up a bit."

"What about the lake we passed a mile or so back? That might do the trick," Connor suggested.

"Just what I was thinking," Andrew agreed, so they turned away from the cobblestones and headed back the way they came.

The second season of berries had ripened, and as the boys got closer to the lake, the thorny vines grew all along the road. Andrew liked the raspberries the best and Connor didn't seem to care what kind of berry it was. He was always hungry and usually ate anything they could find.

When they started to catch glimpses of the lake through the trees, Connor called back, "Hey, this looks like an old trail."

Andrew followed him off the road and into the underbrush. The patchwork canopy of small trees lining the edge of the road offered some welcome shade, but the rabbit path Connor had followed disappeared halfway down the hill. They did their

best to navigate the rest of the way on their own, and they struggled to keep their footing on the overgrown and uneven hillside.

"Nice trail," Andrew said sarcastically.

"Don't forget whose idea this was," Connor snapped back as the trees gradually gave way to an open field covered by brown, waist high grass and weeds.

Connor only hesitated long enough to get his bearings, then lifted his arms and boldly waded into the sea of brown. His trailblazing led them across the field, around a multitude of thorny obstacles and several out of place boulders.

With their destination finally in view, Connor quickly made it out of the grass, and told Andrew, "It's bigger than I thought it would be. Look," he said, stopping abruptly and pointing off to the north, "It stretches clear over into those trees."

Stepping next to Connor, Andrew said, "Come on, let's get in and cool off."

They quickly stripped down to just their shorts and were about to wade into the water, when Connor said, "Andrew, I'm starving. Let's check out the far side over there for some berries before we get in."

"Right now?!"

"Come on. It'll only take a few minutes. I'm starving!"

"Fine!" Andrew complained. "But you lead the way."

With bare feet, the boys cautiously stepped through the weeds along the shoreline until they found a tangled patch of raspberries, blackberries, and thimbleberries growing under a stand of massive oak trees. Before long they each had two handfuls of juicy ripe berries, and as Connor shoved a handful in his mouth, they heard the high-pitched buzzing.

Glancing up, Andrew and Connor watched as a dark cloud of mosquitoes descended upon them.

"We're under attack, RUN!" Andrew yelled.

He took off running toward the lake and tripped, falling to his hands and knees. Berry juice oozed out from between his fingers.

Connor laughed out loud, shoved his last handful of berries into his mouth and passed Andrew on the trail. His arms moved in rhythm with his strong legs, and he quickly sped up into a full sprint. Running into the lake up to his knees, Connor dove into the cool refreshing water.

Andrew knew he was ahead of the swarm, but before he could get back up, he had a leg full of bites and a few on his back.

"Aaaah, those things are fast!" Andrew yelled, jumping to his feet and stuffing his only remaining handful of berries into his mouth. After a short sprint, he followed Connor into the lake and as soon as his head broke the surface of the water, the teasing started.

"How'd that berry juice taste?" Connor laughed with his head bobbing up and down in the water.

Andrew still had a mouthful of berries, but he managed to yell back through the juice, "The Black Guard, they got me! I'm a goner."

He let some of the blood-red juice dribble out of his mouth and down his chin while Connor looked on with a smile. Andrew took a deep breath through his nose and slid under the water. With his hand just above the waterline, he waved a final farewell and slipped away.

As soon as he was deep enough, Andrew flipped himself around and dove to the bottom of the lake. After twenty feet, the warm water on the surface turned down right cold and everything faded into a murky green.

When he finally arrived at the bottom, he reached into the cold shadows and grabbed a handful of slippery, oozing mud. Flipping back around, he swam to the surface holding the mud tightly in-between both hands; making sure it wouldn't wash away.

Scanning the top of the water, he saw Connor treading water ten feet from where he was going to come up.

Andrew gave a few good kicks and broke the surface with enough speed to get most of his chest out of the water. He pulled his arm back and let the mud fly. Connor saw it coming and yelled at Andrew to stop, but he was too late...Direct Hit!

A splatter of mud went from Connor's hair all the way down to his chin and neck. A nice big glob went right into his mouth, and he even got a little in his nose! Andrew didn't mean for that to happen, but it was a sweet reward after being laughed at. Connor wiped his face as he gagged and spat out the putrid smelling muck. Finally, he dove underwater.

When he came up, Connor's face was bright red, and he locked onto Andrew with a dangerous, piercing glare. Not that it was hard to get Connor angry. Actually, it was something Andrew excelled at, but from the look in his eyes, Connor was out for revenge. Luckily for Andrew, he had always been a much better swimmer.

Andrew got out of the water and danced a little jig, while singing, "Connor is a mud eater, mud eater, mud eater. Connor is a mud eater, that's why he's so dumb." Then he ran down the shoreline and jumped back into the water.

Connor chased Andrew for at least fifteen minutes before he realized he wasn't going to catch him.

"I'm gonna get you when we're done swimming. You just wait and see!" Connor yelled.

With a huge smile on his face, Andrew teased, "I didn't mean for it to go in your mouth, or your nose, or your hair. It was just a lucky shot!" Then he started laughing.

"You're gonna be sorry when I catch you!"

"You know I wouldn't throw that stuff at you if you weren't so afraid to go down there."

"I am not afraid!"

“Oh, come on, Connor. You never go down to the bottom because you’re just a big Mud Chicken.” Andrew ‘clucked’ like a chicken while swimming around the edge of the lake, just beyond Connor’s reach.

Connor didn’t like to admit he was afraid of anything and today was no exception. Andrew knew this of course and followed up his ‘clucking’ with, “Hey mud eater. I dare you to go stick your foot in the mud at the bottom.”

“Shut up, Andrew! You’re already gonna get it.”

Andrew gave out a “Cluck, cluck, cluck, cluck,” while swimming around and flapping his arms like a chicken. “Hey, look,” he laughed, “I invented the Chicken Stroke.”

Connor actually laughed a little, but then he yelled, “I’m not a chicken! I’m gonna grab a handful of that stuff and make you eat it!”

Andrew knew how much Connor hated the bottom of lakes, and he smiled because he could see Connor had already convinced himself to brave the murky depths.

Andrew mercilessly gave out a few more ‘clucks’ and a big rooster call.

“Wait right there, smart guy. I’ll be back with your little mud-treat in just a second.”

Connor took three deep breaths and held his fourth one. He glared at Andrew one last time and ducked his head underwater, popping his feet up.

Andrew smiled and began counting aloud, “One King’s crown, two King’s crowns, three King’s crowns.”

“He’ll be up in less than ten seconds,” he thought while he kept counting.

When Andrew got to ten King’s crowns, he was still smiling. He started shouting the numbers loud enough for Connor to hear, “Eleven King’s crowns, twelve King’s crowns, thirteen King’s crowns!”

It wasn’t until he reached twenty King’s crowns that he started to think Connor was really going to do it.

“Well, I’m not gonna be here when he shows up,” Andrew thought, taking a deep breath. He counted, “Twenty-two King’s crowns, twenty-three King’s crowns,” and thought, “He’s probably right under my feet trying to scare me. He never even went down to the bottom.” He took a second deep breath, then a third and letting it out, he yelled, “Twenty-six King’s crowns! Connor Duncan is a mud chicken!”

He took his fourth deep breath and held it, dipped his head under the water, popped his legs up over his head, and went to spoil Connor’s little joke.

Andrew was down ten feet in just a couple of seconds. He didn’t see Connor so he kept going into the colder darker water.

“Thirty King’s crowns, thirty-one King’s crowns, thirty-two King’s crowns.”

As the light green faded into shadows, a pair of ghostly white hands appeared. They were opening and closing, over and over.

When Connor's arms and face emerged, he looked up, and a cloud of bubbles poured out of his mouth. Andrew heard the eerie scream and every hair on his body prickled.

With an out-of-focused look in his eyes, Connor desperately grabbed at Andrew like a prisoner reaching through the bars of a jail cell.

"Forty King's crowns, forty-one King's crowns."

Andrew looked down at Connor's feet, but his legs just faded away. Avoiding Connor's desperate grabs, he took hold of his wrists. Connor didn't offer any resistance as Andrew tried to pull him up, but after two or three feet, he just stopped.

"Fifty King's crown," echoed in Andrew's head as his chest began to burn.

Andrew looked closer into the silty, black mud dripping off Connor's feet. It was dark, but not dark enough to hide the reflection of two small black eyes. Once Andrew saw the eyes, the rest of the camouflage fell away, revealing the horrifying creature.

Its head was as wide as both of Connor's feet put together and just behind the head was the top of a huge shell. Andrew watched in horror as the giant snapping turtle re-secured its grip on Connor's foot.

Andrew had lost count of the seconds, but he knew they were both out of time. He got behind Connor and wrapped his arms around his chest. Andrew kicked his legs trying to pull him away from the creature, but it was no good.

His chest was on fire, and Connor wasn't moving anymore! In desperation, Andrew moved in front of Connor, took hold of his wrists, and sank to the bottom.

Andrew's toes rested on the soft, thick slime covering the monster's shell. Bending his knees, he pushed off as hard as he could. The sharp ridges of the shell slipped past his toes, shoving the enormous snapping turtle deep into the mud.

Shooting up, he yanked Connor's wrists with all his strength. A little popping noise echoed through the water and finally, Connor started moving toward the surface.

Andrew was just about to breathe in water when his head burst through the surface, and he took his first desperate breath of air! He pulled Connor up, but then he disappeared back under the water.

Winded and bobbing at the surface, Andrew could only take short, sharp breaths. When he could finally hold his breath again, he dipped back under the water and saw Connor floating in a cloud of pink. With the pink slowly turning red, Andrew realized it had to be blood.

Connor slowly moved his arms up and down, making it look like he was trying to fly. His mouth was open, he never looked at Andrew and the only color in his face was the blood-red water. Andrew grabbed Connor's arm again and pulled him up to the surface, but Connor had stopped breathing.

Andrew knew he had to get him to shore, but he was exhausted, and Connor was just dead weight; the thirty-foot journey felt like it took forever.

Finally, Andrew's toes brushed against the bottom of the lake. Digging them into the sandy mud and rocks, he dragged Connor up the shore by his arms. He pulled everything except Connor's feet out of the water and collapsed. Connor rolled toward Andrew and threw up. Berries and water went everywhere.

"At least you're alive," Andrew wheezed between gasps.

To his astonishment, Connor sat up, grabbed his right foot with both hands and started screaming.

Andrew sat up to see what the problem was, but Connor was in the way.

"Let me look at it," Andrew wheezed.

When he pulled Connor's hands away, the big toe was completely gone, and a thick stream of blood pulsed out of Connor's foot.

Connor passed out, and Andrew tasted berries.

Scrambling up the rocky slope, Andrew grabbed his shirt. Racing back, he wrapped it around the end of Connor's foot. With one hand on the shirt, Andrew slipped off his belt and wrapped it tightly around Connor's ankle. Then Andrew wound it around the middle of the foot a couple times and cinched it tight.

He dragged Connor to the top of the slope by the edge of the water and pulled him into a seated position. Standing below him, Andrew yanking Connor off the ledge, and took Connor's full weight across the back of his shoulders. Andrew's legs trembled, and the rocks cut into his feet.

Stumbling up the path, Andrew realized he wasn't wearing shoes, but he couldn't stop. He would never be able to pick Connor up again.

He carried Connor back through the tall grass, across the field, and up the overgrown hillside. When they got to the dirt road, Andrew fell to his knees, dropping Connor behind him.

"I'm cold. Take me home, Andrew."

Andrew cinched the belt tighter around Connor's foot, but the flow of blood only slowed a little. Gasping for air and covered in blood, dirt, sweat, and berry juice, Andrew managed to say, "I can't stop the bleeding! You have to put pressure on your toe, or you're going to bleed to death. I have to go for help. If anybody comes by, ask for help. Don't wait for me; just get yourself help."

He grabbed Connor's shoulders, and their eyes met.

"You have to put pressure on your toe! You have to try! I'll be right back. Don't give up!"

Andrew stood up and his vision blurred; his legs were heavy and stiff. He tried rubbing his eyes, but the sticky mess on his hands only pulled against the skin. He looked for any road dust kicked up by a passing horse or wagon, but everything was perfectly still.

Chapter 2



Mr. Miller

Andrew ran for as long as he could, but fear and desperation could only take him so far. By the time he got back to the cobblestones, he was limping and wheezing. Light-

headed from dehydration and unable to do anything but walk fast, Andrew staggered hopelessly down the road.

Just when he felt like he might be getting closer to the town, the road turned sharply and split in two. On his left the cobblestone road continued into the distance and on his right, a deeply rutted farm road climbed up and over a short, steep hill.

With waves of nausea washing over him, he stopped at the junction, put his hands on his knees and tried to catch his breath.

When he lifted his head, he thought a haze of dust was hovering just above the surface of the dirt road, but he wasn't sure. He knew the dirt road would lead him away from the town, and if he guessed wrong, Connor was as good as dead.

Precious moments slipped away while he struggled to decide.

"I have to make it to town," he told himself.

Starting back down the cobblestone road, he took one last look to his right. His eyes followed the contour of the hill up to the top where, just off the surface of the road, little flecks of dirt and dust danced in the sunlight.

He veered right, reached the top of the hill and glimpsed a rider on horseback just over the next rise. Hope rushed back into him as he tried to yell, but he wasn't loud enough. Exhausted and panicked, he kept running and walking as fast as he could.

When he was fifty yards from the rider, the man reigned in his skinny gray mare, and the two made eye contact. With Andrew wheezing and limping up next to his stirrup, the man looked down and in a dry, slow voice, he asked, "What did you do boy, kill somebody?"

Between gasps, Andrew panted, "It's my friend...Connor Duncan...back by the lake...he's bleeding to death on the road...Can you help me?"

The man's eyes widened, and his expression tightened as he dug his heels into the horse. The horse reared, the man yanked hard on the reins and turned back toward the main road, yelling, "Hyah, hyah!"

The sound of the horse quickly faded into the distance and Andrew took a few minutes to catch his breath. As soon as the last wave of nausea and dizziness passed, he started limping back toward the main road.

He held out his dirty, blood-covered hands and chuckled like a crazy person. His palms were scraped-up, and there didn't seem to be an inch of his body that wasn't covered in dirt or blood.

"He's right, I do look like a killer," Andrew thought, making his smile fade as he pictured Connor's lifeless body back on the road.

Andrew had almost made it down the hill and back to the split in the road when he heard the horse racing toward him on the cobblestones. The gallop slowed to a canter as it came clip-clopping around the corner. When the man spurred it back to a full gallop, he went speeding by with Connor's body draped over the front of the saddle.

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