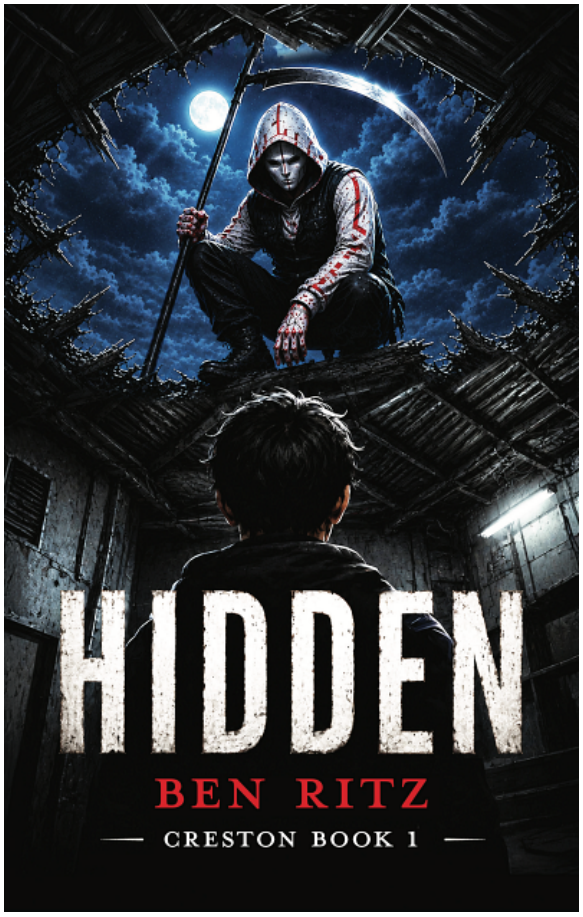


A boy with amnesia washes up on the shores of Creston while a masked villain and a mystery savior grapple for war and peace. The boy and the town must figure out how it all connects before the scales tip towards war.

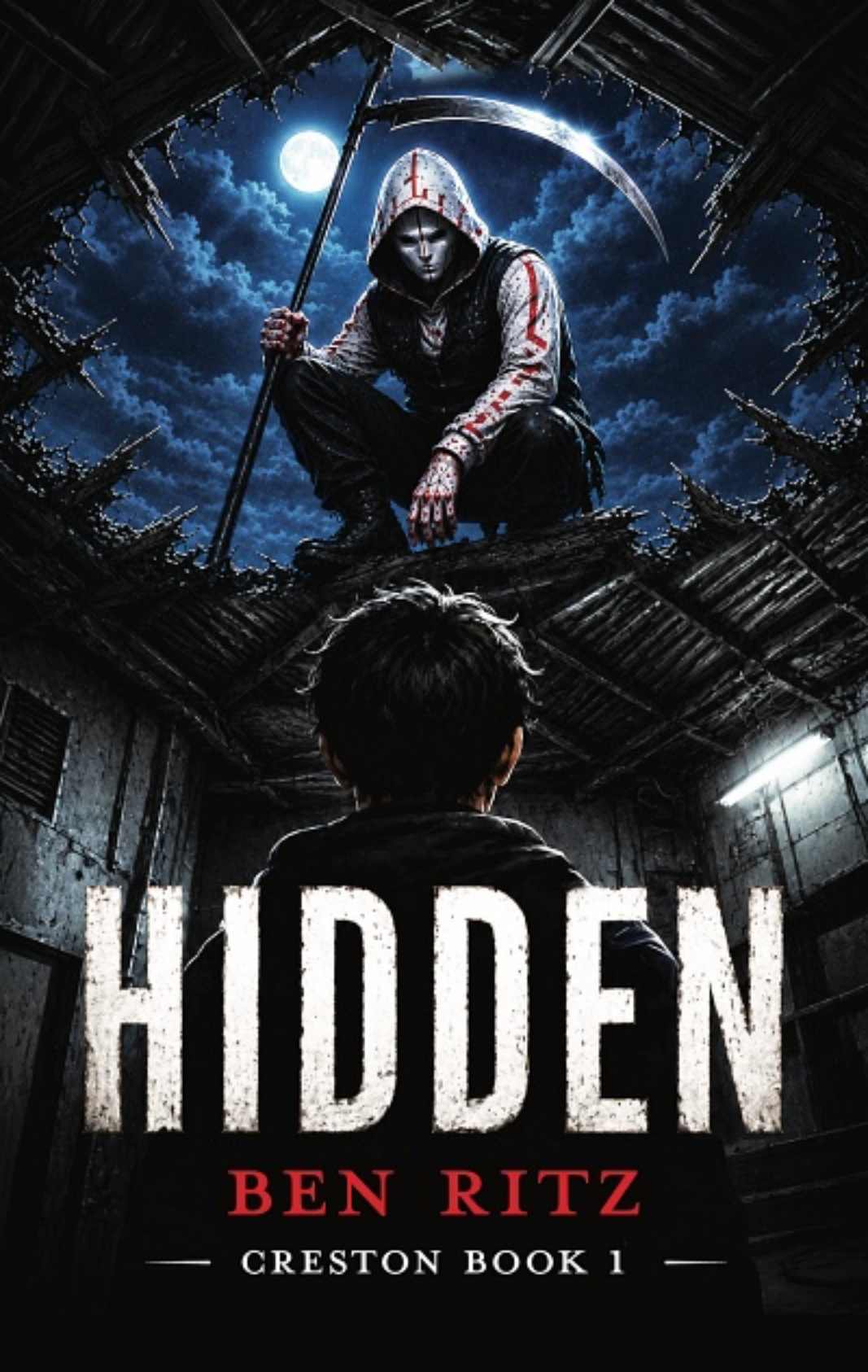
Hidden

By Ben Ritz

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HIDDEN
BEN RITZ
CRESTON BOOK 1

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Chapter 1:
Reawakening

The light brought instant pain, and he waited several moments until he risked opening his eyes again. It was all around; no matter where he put his hand, it still snuck through to blind him. Only exposure would make it stop. He braved the light until it finally subsided, giving way to a place foreign to him. Empty beds lined each wall, sheets nicely folded. Stands of medical tools lay adjacent to each bed, and undrawn curtains hung still.

Everything was white. The walls, the linens, the small cloths that covered the high tables. The smell of the place was overwhelming and contained a crispness that brought a tear to his eye. Never before had he experienced anything so vividly real. Or had he once known this place? He scanned his memory....

And realized there was nothing there. No knowledge, experiences, or scenes came to his mind; it was as empty as this large room. He started to panic. Surely, answers could snap him out of it, but there was nothing.

What's my name? Where did I come from? How did I end up here? The walls did not speak. He tried to move, to do any action to lead him to the answers, but there was resistance. A tube ran into his arm, right into his veins. He pulled it out, exposing a red needle that just kept coming. Blood. He had

seen it before. He knew it for sure, but he could not say why. It was just a certainty.

The door slammed open, and a woman burst through. Her coat was white too, and the sun glinted off a smooth badge below her shoulder. *She's supposed to be here. I can't say the same for me.*

"Slowly," she warned, running up to him. She took the needle and placed it delicately on the stand. "Calm down. Sit back."

He looked around to see if he should listen to this woman, if something in the room knew what was better for him. The room remained silent. The woman gently laid her hand on his shoulder and guided him back into the bed. A new feeling washed over him, and it felt like healing. Whatever it was, it was enough to make him forget his panic, if only for a moment. But he still needed answers.

"Where am I?" he asked, though that wasn't the most important question. "Who am I?"

"You're in Creston," the doctor said. "It's one of the towns within The Barrier. You're in a hospital. As for who you are, we were hoping you could tell us."

Creston. He'd heard of it before. He knew it for sure, but he could not say why. It was like the memory of the word had been planted back in his head, and he couldn't recall the time when he did not know the word—even though it had only been a moment earlier.

"Do you know your name?" the woman asked. "For example, my name is Dr. Price."

She held up the tag on her long white coat, a shiny "Price" etched into it. He looked at his own shirt to see if there was a name on it, but the bland design of hospital clothing stared back up at him.

"I—I can't remember," he said. He sank back into his pillow, feeling dejected.

"Is there anything you do remember?" Dr. Price said, leaning forward. "Anything at all."

He thought hard, for he wanted to know himself. Nothing came back from before the room. He pinched his eyes closed in frustration, trying to force his memory to bring back something other than Creston and blood. Something solid. His head started to ache from the effort.

"I'm being carried," he said slowly. Dr. Price smiled. "There's sand. And water. It looks like a river."

"Yes," Dr. Price urged. "That's where he found you. Washed up on the river shore. Your memory's aiding you. Is there anything else?"

He thought hard, but all that came was water. It was so real and so vivid that he was surprised he had not known it just a moment before. Of course he was found on the river's shore. It was a certainty, and it was impossible to think that he hadn't known that at one point.

"You faded in and out of consciousness for a while," Dr. Price said. "But I couldn't garner anything useful. I decided to make you sleep for longer in the hopes that you could talk when you woke up."

"Who was it who found me?" he asked hurriedly. Maybe they would have more answers.

"It was one of the Sentries here at Creston," Dr. Price said, though he did not know what she meant. "Curtis. He brought you straight here."

He nodded and tried to move again. Dr. Price's hand moved to his shoulder once more.

"Take it slow, boy. You don't know enough about where you've ended up to try and figure it out on your own."

Just then, his stomach growled loudly. He wondered how long it had been since he had eaten something solid—something that didn't come from a tube. The hunger crept to his sides, begging to be addressed.

"I'll get some food," Dr. Price said, heading for the door. "Don't go anywhere until I come back."

He didn't leave the room, but he tried to find as much as he could about this new place. The room had one window; it was at ground level and only faced a group of trees that seemed too verdant to be real. All trees cannot be dead or dying, he told himself. They had to once be full of life in order to reach the end of one. Still, the tree that stood beyond the window did not match the image his wounded mind brought back to him. Not that he had expected anything more. Blood, Creston, sand and water. His mind only spoke in cryptic pieces, offering no connection.

He saw a mirror resting in the corner of the room. A thin, tall one that would capture his whole frame. He inhaled sharply, realizing that he had no idea what he looked like.

Suddenly nervous, he stepped in front of the mirror, expecting some broken creature to be staring back at him.

He looked…normal. A little skinny, but muscular enough not to seem weak. His brown hair was short but fell naturally to the center of his forehead. He looked to be in his early teens: fifteen, if he were to guess. His eyes matched his hair, and his face was smooth. If it wasn't for the hospital gown, there would be nothing to signify that he had been found semi-conscious on a riverbank with no memory of his past.

One unique thing did stand out, and he had almost missed it on his initial observation. There was a rather jagged wound at the top of his chest, poking out just over the gown. He unbuttoned it to find the laceration stretched a long way, level with the bottom of his pecs. He ran his finger along the length of it, noting each individual ridge. The wound was only just beginning to scar, suggesting the injury was rather recent. What he could have possibly experienced to lead to such a large wound, he did not know.

Dr. Price came back into the room, holding a tray of food and a bag of clothes. The sight of the food made him realize how hungry he was, and the bland-looking meal of a sandwich and an apple looked like a magnificent feast in his eyes. He sat down and took a bite of the sandwich.

Something exploded from the back of his mind in a way that none of his previous memories had until that point. Everything regarding food came back to him in that first bite. He experienced again every meal that he had ever eaten; it was like he was taking thousands of bites in one. The taste of milk,

cheese, blackberries, and everything else swarmed back into his head while making a stop at his taste buds along the way. He experienced them all at once, but each had its own distinct flavor because they represented different times in his past. There were some bad tastes in there, but a majority of them were pure bliss. The first bite of the sandwich was the best bite he would ever have because with it came every experience with food he had forgotten. He sat back in his bed, trying to recover from the explosion of flavor his memory had just provided for him.

"Good?" Dr. Price asked. He nodded.

"Did you figure anything out while I was gone?" Dr. Price said next. "Anything about your family or friends or your home?"

"No, nothing like that," he muttered between bites. "Wherever I was, I got this."

He pulled back his gown, revealing the wound on his chest. Dr. Price instantly became concerned, leaning forward to run her hand along the ridges as well. She took a moment to examine it with one of her tools, poking and prying at the skin around the gash.

"Well, it's already starting to heal, so that's good," she said. "But I worry about how you got it in the first place."

That makes two of us, he thought to himself.

"Well, my boy, I don't know much about you," Dr. Price said. "But I know that you can't go back to where you came from. Showing up unconscious on a riverbank with a scar probably means you didn't come from anywhere good.

"But we can help you here at Creston. We can keep you safe from whatever gave you this wound in the first place. It's up to you, of course, and if you don't want to stay here, there's nothing forcing you to. But Creston could be a great place for you. The school year is coming up, and there'll be plenty of new faces just like you. In fact, my son is going to be a freshman here; I can make sure he'll be a resource for you."

"Is Creston a school?" he asked. He hadn't seen anything beyond this hospital room, but the room seemed a bit big to be a school nurse's office.

"Yes and no," Dr. Price responded. "Its main purpose is schooling for certain. Every town within The Barrier serves as a high school first and foremost, but you'll find there's something…more. It's why we don't refer to them as schools but towns. It's a community, and the students are only a part of what makes each town unique."

He didn't know entirely what she meant. Perhaps when he saw the rest of Creston he'd understand what it meant to be more than a school.

"Whose clothes are those?" he asked, finally acknowledging the bag she had brought in with the food.

"They're yours," she smiled. "The ones you were wearing on the shore. We dried them for you, of course."

She handed the bag over for him to examine. Nothing about the clothes gave any clue as to where he came from. Plain white shorts and a plain grey T-shirt. His shoes were unmarked and flat. He set them down, frustrated.

"Don't you want to put them on?" Dr. Price asked. "I figured you'd want something to wear other than boring old hospital clothes."

He nodded and hopped out of bed to slide into his clothes. He expected his memory to recall the clothes instantly, as it had with the sand and the water, but it didn't. He couldn't know whether he had worn these clothes before or not, but he had to trust Dr. Price to lead him through the uncertainty. After he laced up his shoes, he made to hop back into his bed, but he didn't jump quite high enough, and his knee collided hard with the metal bar that ran along the side. It wouldn't have been a severe injury ordinarily, but a similar thing occurred as when he had bitten into the sandwich. This time, it wasn't all his memories of food rushing back; it was all his memories of pain.

It was only a brief moment, but it was the worst moment he had ever felt. His mind and body were on fire, and he collapsed to the ground. He felt again every stub of his toe, every time he hit his head on something above him while standing up, every time a fist had been thrust into his stomach, onto his face, across his cheek. He was curled up on the ground, shuddering from that horrible moment of total darkness. Everything had been so separate yet so synchronized, as if each little moment was conspiring against him. Pain swarmed into his head, and he knew nothing but darkness. He lost all good feeling for a singular moment as his mind was ripped apart. He felt around his body for bruises—there had to be some; every blow had felt so real. His mind was playing tricks on him, though. It bombarded him with all the feelings of pain, but he

had already lived the physical consequences. Nothing was harming him other than himself. But even this realization couldn't help him as the moments of pain remained so fresh in his head.

Dr. Price was at his side, laying her hands on him. He saw something orange start making its way across his body, even disappearing beneath the skin in some spots. He had no idea what it was, but he was terrified. He scrambled backwards across the ground, knocking over a cart of supplies and hearing each item skid across the floor. The *orange* vanished when he was out of Dr. Price's reach, and he looked at her with a hurt look.

"What are you doing?" he practically shouted. "What the hell was that orange stuff?"

"Oh no," Dr. Price said. "You forgot about that, even?"

"I forgot about what?" he said. "Tell me!"

Dr. Price thought to herself for a moment, struggling to think of what to say or a way to say it. "What you just saw, my boy, was magic."

"Stop lying to me!" he shouted. "I can't trust anyone in this damn place. Tell me the truth, or I'm leaving right now."

"I was not lying, my boy," she said, and the *orange* reappeared in her hands. He jumped back even further, trying to figure out how the doctor was making these orange particles dance around in her hands. They looked so…unnatural, like they didn't deserve to be here.

"You'll find magic is common practice within The Barrier," Dr. Price said slowly. "Even you, my boy, are a mage.

Your memory simply has just not informed you of this fact just yet."

He couldn't believe what he was hearing and was just waiting for Dr. Price to burst out laughing, confessing to her joke. Yet she kept speaking. It was either the most elaborate, cruel joke of all time—or it was actually the truth.

"My magic takes the first of four forms: the Healing form," she said. "That's why I'm a doctor. I was only trying to ease the pain, nothing more."

The *orange* disappeared once again from her hands, and he was able to breathe a sigh of relief. He felt much better when that supernatural power was gone. Though Dr. Price had said something that meant he would surely have to see it again.

"Did you say that I was a mage?" he said shakily. "I have access to that orange stuff, too?"

"Yes, you are a mage. But only two of the four forms have access to the *orange*, and every mage only takes one form. You may have access to the *orange*; you may not."

"How are you so certain I'm a mage?" he asked.

Dr. Price leaned in close and held his hand. "Everyone within The Barrier is a mage, my boy. The Barrier is a dome that separates the magical world from the physical world. Within The Barrier, mages live with only their own kind. They can make their own towns, their own communities, their own schools. Creston is one of these mage havens. A place for only us."

Dr. Price was smiling, but he was less than convinced. He really was still trying to process the whole possibility that

magic was real, but then his memory provided an assist. Something came back, telling him that magic *did* exist. He had magic inside of him, just like Dr. Price. Just like the other memories, it was now certain in his mind.

"You should be glad that you are a mage," Dr. Price said. "What do you think is helping you retrieve these memories? If you weren't a mage, your past would be completely gone. Your amnesia would be incurable. But instead, something inside of you is helping replace what you lost. It's searching for the magic that it was dependent on for its memory preservation."

"Why would I be dependent on magic for memory preservation?" he asked.

"Every mage has magic inside of them that helps the bodily systems with their functions. It helps automatic tasks like digestion, blood filtration, and pathogen detection run smoother. It's why mages have faster metabolisms, stronger immune systems, and lower rates of disease and infection all around. The organs and blood vessels work with magic to improve our day-to-day lives without us knowing any better.

"Unfortunately, that means that our body becomes dependent on magic at a certain point. It runs more smoothly when it's present, but if it were to be removed, certain systems might shut down entirely."

It sounded like Dr. Price had pulled the explanation right out of a textbook. "Is that what you're saying happened to me?" he asked. "Something removed magic from my body, and it caused me to shut down?"

"It's the only explanation that makes sense," Dr. Price said. "I don't know how it was removed, but there are certainly…gaps of magic in your brain, particularly around the posterior hippocampus and the medial temporal lobe. I found them on my original sweep of your body when you were first brought here. Everything points to the magic in your brain being removed suddenly, causing a total memory wipe."

He frowned, angry at this new information. Perhaps the magic inside of him was trying to find the memories as Dr. Price claimed, but its existence had also led to their erasure in the first place. It was both a blessing and a curse.

He tried hard to get something back from his memory. Anything like the revelations he had already experienced. Magic, blood, Creston, sand, and water. The basis of his existence. Was there nothing beyond these things that mattered? He concentrated hard, closing his eyes to block out the light that had become blinding once more. There was nothing past the water. His memory took him up the river from which he was found, but returned nothing else. It seemed to be the end of the line; it seemed to be as far back as his story went. Then, out of the sea of endless blue, something appeared. Something he wasn't expecting, but he accepted it all the same.

"Max Holiday," he said, smiling, for he had heard it before. He knew it for sure, but he could not say why. "My name is Max Holiday."

Chapter 2:
Creston

Max rolled the name over in his head, and every time, it sounded like his own. He was surprised that a name borrowed from the archives of his history fit so well, but if he could trust anything, he could trust the memories that were coming back to him. He tried to remember the time that he had been nameless, but it was difficult. That person he had been mere moments ago had still been Max Holiday, just one a little more in the dark. Max Holiday has always been his identity because how could there have been a time when there wasn't?

A few hours passed with him trying to recover more memories, but it had taken a great deal of effort just to even recall his name. He was not mad that he couldn't recall more, for he had already gathered the most important and essential part of his identity. The rest of the time was filled with Dr. Price giving him some exercises to do. She gave him math problems, reading comprehension tests, and quizzed him on basic history. He had performed as adequately as anyone his age would—his memory problems seemed to apply to personal issues rather than set-in-stone facts. Dr. Price quickly determined that he was doing fine in all areas and said that if he were to join Creston High this year, he wouldn't be far behind the rest of the class. School would start in just a couple of days, but the doctor assured him that he was ready.

Dr. Price went away for a moment after she had implemented the tests, again requesting that Max stay where he was. He was itching to see the rest of his new home, but he obeyed Dr. Price's command. There was no reason to doubt her, as everything she had said had appeared to be true. Even her claims that magic was real seemed to be rooted in his memory, despite his inability to produce the *orange* as she had. It was not until several minutes later that she returned, and not alone. Two teenage boys came with her, both looking to be around his age. They were both as skinny as he was, if not thinner, but one was quite a bit taller and the other a bit shorter. Neither of them had any muscle to speak of.

Max nervously shuffled across the room.

"Who are you?" he said.

"Hey, Max, is it?" the taller boy said, extending his hand. "It's nice to meet you. My mom filled me in on your…condition."

Right, Dr. Price said she had a son, Max realized. Come to think of it, the boy did look similar to the doctor in terms of facial structure. He shook the boy's hand.

"Casey Matthews," the shorter one chimed in. His voice sounded funny, like it came from somewhere else.

"Right, sorry," the tall one said. "My name's Owen…Owen Price. We're here to show you around Creston."

"Yeah, mate, we're busting you out," Casey said. "I know you're curious about where you got dumped when your memory hit the bin. We'll tell ya all the good spots to hit for when the school year starts up."

There was definitely something odd about that one, but what he said was making Max excited. He *did* want to see Creston. He wanted answers, and Dr. Price hadn't provided all of them. Even though the Price kid seemed a bit hesitant, and Casey's voice sounded odd, Max found himself heading towards the front doors.

The light was already fading, so they would have to make the tour quick. He hurried outside, and for the first time he could remember, Max felt the grass underneath him brush up against his ankles. It sent a chill through him as the night air had made the grass cool to the touch. Max instantly preferred it over the hard floors of the stuffy hospital room. Goosebumps crept up his arms and the side of his body, but he welcomed them.

Owen and Casey pulled up beside him, watching him closely.

"My mom said to be back before it gets dark out, so we better hurry."

"Piss on that," Casey said. "If we're late, we'll just say that Max wanted to look around more. There's no chance your mum can blame him for that."

"Fine," Owen said, laughing. "But if she's mad, I'm going to blame you."

"Do it. I couldn't care less what your mum thinks of me."

"Okay, guys," Max said impatiently. "We have to go."

They set off away from the hospital, Max nervous and excited for what lay ahead. Nevertheless, his anxiety dissipated

because he became enveloped in the spectacle that was Creston.

Everything was closed down, Owen explained, partly because it was still the last few days of summer and partly because it was the evening. Even so, Max was intrigued. They passed by Leo's Arcade, which was a massive building draped in neon lighting. Max imagined what it looked like when the lights were turned on in the first hours of the evening. Owen described it as a neon beacon and said you wouldn't find a better go-kart track or mini golf course anywhere else within The Barrier.

"Over there is the Housing District," Owen said, pointing to the left. "That's where we live. Any full-time Creston staff get a place there automatically."

"That's pretty cool," Max said. "You get to live there for free."

"It's alright," Owen said. "There's no cell service within The Barrier, though, which is a common complaint from my sisters. I don't mind it as much. Less screen time is good for you."

"My mum used to strap a fishbowl to our heads if we went over our screen time limit," Casey said. Owen and Max turned around and gave him a strange look. "We had to clean up any water we spilled. It was weird, but it made it really hard to look down at the screens, especially if you wanted the fish to live."

At least Casey was able to acknowledge that it was weird. Max tried to ignore him and let Owen tell him about the town. They strolled down Creston's main road, the streetlights

passing over each building. Owen pointed out an ice cream shop and some dormitory buildings on the left, as well as a club that overlooked the river. While the waters were out of sight due to an embankment, Max knew the river was there. The sound of its rushing current filled the otherwise quiet night. Somewhere along its shore, the Sentry Curtis had found him, dead to the world and void of memory.

A streetlight beam came into focus across the street, illuminating a line of shops. Owen went through them all, claiming some to be restaurants where students could spend some sort of currency, should they ever get tired of the cafeteria. There was a bowling alley, a salon and barbershop, and a clothing store labeled "Everything Creston." Max tried to get a good look inside the shop, but curtains were drawn across the windows. A religious building of some sort lay a bit further off the main road, a cross within a ball protruding from its spire.

"That building down there," Owen said, referencing a larger one farther in the distance, even beyond the church. "It's called The Jyro, but it's kind of hard to explain what it's for."

Max nodded, not wanting to argue with these people he had just met. Owen paused a bit to see if Max would follow up, but the silence caused him to carry on.

"Up here is the dorm Casey and I were going to be in," Owen said, pointing to an unassuming dorm that looked identical to the other buildings he had addressed as dormitories. "We were going to be roommates, but I don't know if that's going to happen anymore."

"Why, what happened?" Max said, nervous that there was a rift between them and that things were about to get awkward.

"You happened, Max," Owen responded. "You showed up after everyone had already been given a dorm assignment, and my mom told me that it wouldn't be good for you to have a roommate who doesn't know the nature of your situation. She asked me if I was willing to be your roommate, and I said yes."

"You didn't have to do that," Max said.

"Trust me, I was glad for it. Would've done anything to escape this weirdo," he joked while turning to Casey.

Casey laughed. "Whatever, mate, you're gonna miss out. I'll be having a good time with whichever bloke I get paired with while you're explaining to Max what having a good time means."

Max chuckled, but the comment stung. It didn't seem fair to make jabs at his condition, but considering who it had come from, Max knew not to take it too seriously. Owen voiced similar opinions, saying, "Just ignore him. Casey forgets to use his filter sometimes, and I really don't mind explaining something to you if you don't understand. I mean, I couldn't even imagine being in your shoes right now."

Max decided that he liked Owen. Even though he seemed reluctant to help at first, the promise to explain things to him meant a lot, and he seemed less tactless than Casey.

The silence between the three boys was too quiet for Max, so he asked, "Are we not going to be in this dorm?"

"No, they'd move us to Reed Hall since it's the only one with open rooms. We're heading up there now, actually. It's a good location. Close to the school and City Hall."

Max just now noticed the towering building in front of them. The dome suggested that this was city hall. A couple of dormitory buildings flanked it, but they didn't rise up to quite the same level. It was hard to tell in the dark, but Max guessed it was painted pure white. A rogue streetlight beam glancing off a pillar proved Max right. City Hall truly had a powerful look to it, and Max found himself gravitating to it even more than the building where he was going to live for the next nine months.

A statue of a proud silver lion stood in the center of the square, its metal glimmering when the light hit it. A stream of water arched from the lion's mouth, and its faint splash in the fountain base was almost as soothing as the rush of the river.

"Over there is the school," Owen said, pointing past the dorm that wasn't his. "We could go over there, but I imagine we'll get a good tour on the first day."

"That's okay," Max said. "I should probably be getting back to the hospital anyway."

"You can't go now. We haven't taken you down to the river yet," Casey said. "To that spot where the current lets up, and you get a proper swim in."

"If Max wants to go back, we can go back," Owen said.

"No," Max said, surprising himself. "I want to go. I want to see the spot where they found me."

Casey looked at Owen like a child begging his mother for five more minutes at the playground. The taller boy agreed, but it was likely more for Max than it was for Casey. They set off back down the main road and took a right down the path to the riverside club—the modern building that had been one of Max's favorites. Outside of the majestic city hall and the arcade, of course. He also had to admit that the building Owen had called "The Jyro" intrigued him, especially since Owen had deemed it too complicated to understand.

On their way down to the river, Max asked, "I assume you guys are mages too?" He had wanted to ask for a while, but wasn't sure if it was too obvious a question. Dr. Price had said that everyone within The Barrier was a mage, but he wanted to hear it from a second source.

"Um, yeah, I'm a Healer like my mom," Owen said. "Being a Healer's great because your powers can really only be used to do something good. It's just a strict upgrade, and I'm cool with that."

"It's the most boring one, though," Casey said, his true thoughts slipping out once more. Max wondered whether Casey was aware of it and didn't care or just had no idea that his comments were borderline. "I'm a Sage. Plays right into my strengths of digging up dirt on people."

"Sorry, but I actually don't know what the four forms are," Max said. "Your mom didn't tell me about them yet, only that there were four. And that two of them involved the orange stuff."

"Oh, really?" Owen said. "I figured that would've been something she told you. But that's okay; I can fill you in. The first form is Healing. It's pretty self-explanatory, I think. You use the orange particles to help treat injuries, diseases, all sorts of things.

"The second form is Elemental. An Elemental can manipulate the four elements: fire, earth, air, water." Max paused. Water still triggered a reaction in him. Out of all the memories that had come back to him, the most obvious feature was that there was a ton of water. He shivered at the thought of someone being able to control it.

"The third form is a Sage," Casey said. "What I am. It's kind of a weird one. Sages can look inside the minds of others and experience their memories through their eyes. It really helps with finding out the truth about some things, and you know, checking alibis. Basically, anything to do with crime."

"Wait," Max said. Casey's description of the power seemed to be exactly what he needed. "Could you use your magic to search through my memories? Could you find out where I came from?"

"No can do, mate," Casey said. "How do I describe this? It's like I can flip through your mind like a book and choose to read parts of it. But if you forget something, well, then I don't have access to it the same as you. It falls out of your book. Makes it impossible for me to experience it through your eyes."

"Besides," Owen said. "My mom already tried it. She brought a Sage in to see if she could find anything while you

were unconscious. Seems like a whole lot of nothing came back to her."

"Well, that has nothing to do with that; it's probably because Max didn't give her permission," Casey said. Seeing Max's confused look, he explained further. "The one lame thing about being a Sage, though, is that everyone has a safeguard against it."

"A safeguard?" Max said.

"Yeah," Casey stated. "Being able to walk through your mind all the time would be a huge invasion of privacy, wouldn't it? You have to give a Sage permission to look through your mind. Otherwise, your deepest, darkest secrets could just be seen by a quarter of all mages out there. Most of the time, you're doing something called blocking. It's involuntary, and it keeps Sages out of your head. You even do it while you're unconscious."

"Makes a Sage kinda useless, doesn't it?" Owen joked. "Perhaps even the most boring form?"

"Fair enough," Casey said, laughing. "Looks good on paper, don't it though? Taking a walk through someone else's mind like it's a Sunday afternoon. Imagine how easy it would be to whip people into shape if I could do that all the time."

"What about the fourth form?" Max said, noting that they had left one out.

"Ah, the fourth form's a fun one. You can use the orange particles just like a Healer."

"What can you do with them?"

"Anything," Owen said definitively. "Fix a hole in your shirt, form a knife out of thin air, create a prison cell. Anything but healing, pretty much. Just bring enough orange particles together, and you could make anything you wanted."

Max wasn't expecting that. The implications of the fourth form seemed nearly unlimited. Though there had to be a limit, of course. If there wasn't, Max felt like the world around him would look drastically different. After all, why take the time to build all these buildings if a wielder of the fourth form could just make one when they wanted? There had to be something more.

"Well, I'm a Sage, and Owen's a Healer. But what about you, Max? Do you know what form you are?"

"No. I hope I'm a Sage too, though. Maybe it'll help me look into my own mind and see my own memories." In truth, Max had no idea if Sagecraft allowed him to do that, and judging by the two boys' silences, neither did they.

Owen meandered off the path and ducked down onto the riverbank. The wooden poles lofting the club above the beach formed a maze in the dark, and Max wove through them, passing his hand along each one. The smell of damp wood and rushing water overtook the stale smell of the town. Strange, how he felt a stronger connection to the river even though it was the setting of his memory wipe. But Max didn't think of it as the reason for his amnesia. The smell of the shore and the sand beneath his feet resonated with him, and he only thought of the river as the start of his new life.

"I'm gonna take a look around," Max said. "See if I can find anything."

The current drove quickly over rocks, some of which jutted out above the surface. It seemed to be a dangerous part of the river. In fact, danger signs lined the beach, warning people not to enter at this location. Max couldn't imagine that he had come from this far up the stream. He wouldn't have been able to maneuver through the rocks without getting hurt, given how fast the current was going. Although…he had shown up unconscious with a cut down his chest…

"I don't think you'll get your answers here, mate," Casey warned, his voice cutting through the rush of the water. "My uncle once tried to kayak down a river like this and ended up in the hospital for months. I don't think you'd be up and about like you are if you went through it."

Max nodded, admitting that Casey was probably right. Still, he didn't take his eyes off the river as he walked down the bank, looking for any sign, any sliver of a clue that he could work with. Nothing came, and soon it was too dark to see anything properly.

Chapter 3:
The Twins

The current gradually slowed the further they walked down the bank, and the rocks that had peppered the rapids gave way to nothing but relatively still water. Max noticed a pair of signs on either side of the river that marked the start of the swimming area.

"This is where they found you," Owen said, gesturing towards his left. The beach opened up much wider in this spot. There was no longer a wall of sand and rocks to their side, but an open view of the town once more. The sand changed to grass instantly, and Max stood with one foot on each surface, riding the line between Creston and the river.

He felt around on the ground, digging in the sand to see if there was anything he could use. It was cool to the touch and slid through his fingers easily.

"Where exactly did that Sentry find me?" Max asked, still having no idea what the title meant.

"Not sure, to be honest," Owen replied. "It had to be somewhere closer to the water, though."

Max agreed, scanning the smooth rocks and wet sand that marked the boundary between the beach and the water. He tossed his socks and shoes to the side, wading into the water and bending closer to the ground. Finally, he found something peeking out from beneath a rock near the sand. Max wasn't sure how it had caught onto the rock, given how smooth it was,

or how it had stayed put for the entire time he was in the hospital, but it was there. A thread.

Max scooped it up and ran to the nearest streetlight.

"Going back already?" Casey teased as he pulled off his shirt. "I was going to get a little night swim in."

Max wasn't listening as he held the thread up to the light. White. It perfectly matched the color of his shorts. He rushed back to the spot and made a stack of rocks to mark the exact location where he had been found.

"I was here, alright," Max said definitively. "Right at this spot." He took a step forward and placed his foot into the sand.

His memory bombarded him. It was quick, just like when he took that first bite and when he hit his knee on the bed, but this was different. For a moment, it felt like he was back in the past, and he was actually experiencing the memory as it happened. He was curled up in this spot, but it was brighter outside. Even so, he felt cold. Cold and wet and hollow. Like nothing good could ever happen again.

Then he was back. Casey was trying to convince Owen to hop in the water, but Owen was adamant about getting back. Eventually, Owen lost the battle and took off his shirt, too. But as soon as both boys were about to step into the water, a new sound broke through the Creston night.

Voices. They were coming from the direction of the Housing District. Max was quick to position himself behind Casey and Owen, fearing that the voice belonged to someone who would drag him back to the hospital and punish him for being out too late.

The only light came from weak moonbeams and distant streetlamps, so silhouettes approached them. Two, to be exact, and they both belonged to a particularly large frame. In fact, they were nearly identical. The figures made their way through the darkness, crossing the threshold onto the sand.

"The twins," Owen whispered.

"Price? Is that you?" came a deep voice. The silhouettes came closer and closer, each step giving more focus to their features.

"How'd you know?" Owen called.

"No one else in Creston is that skinny. It's even worse since you're tall too. If you were your British friend's height, you might even look normal, but instead you look like a praying mantis."

"Give it a rest, Jack," the other twin said. His voice was the same as his brother's, and he was just as massive. Both boys were close enough now that their forms began to take shape. Their muscles were profound, their arms and chests massive. They could beat the three of them into a pulp if they wanted to. Hopefully, it wouldn't come to that.

The first twin that had spoken, Jack, ignored his brother. "Price, if I can tell that you're shirtless when it's pitch black out, you're probably doing something wrong. Hit the weights every once in a while. Or does your mom ban them at home?"

Just then, a flame erupted from the hand of one of the twins. It hadn't been there a second ago, and now it lit up the night. Max thought the boy might catch fire and burn right there on the riverbank, but he was completely unharmed. It took Max a

moment to realize that the flame hadn't been accidental. The boy seemed to be holding it and striding confidently forward, waving it back and forth.

The firelight illuminated the twins' features, which were, unsurprisingly, identical. Sparse facial hair clung to their round faces and laced down their necks. They had thick eyebrows and short, black hair. Their eyes reflected the glow of the flames in pupils surrounded by brown irises. Their builds were even more intimidating in the light, as if the fire was emphasizing the power their muscles contained.

There was one difference between the twins, though. The one holding the fire was walking smugly towards them, his eyes never venturing from the three boys. The other fell into stride behind his brother, becoming enveloped in the shadows once more. His gaze bounced between the three of them and his brother.

"I know you, Price. And I know the British one. But who's that behind you?" the one with the flame said. This was Jack. "Doesn't he know that you two don't offer much protection?"

Max stepped out from behind Owen and stood as tall as he could.

"At least this one's got some lean muscle on him," Jack said, waving the flame in Max's direction. "Don't know why you're the one hiding. If there was a fight, you'd fare much better than a skinny Healer and a short Sage. What form are you?"

"Don't know," Max said.

Both twins scoffed and turned to each other. Their derisive laughs filled the night alongside the crackling of the flame.

"That might be the dumbest thing I've heard since I saw you hiding behind these two," Jack said. "Every mage knows what form they are from when they're ten years old. How have you gone five years and not figured it out by now?"

"It's a long story," Owen said, flipping his shirt back over his head. "I don't think you have the patience for it."

"Is one of your parents a Creston staff member?" the other twin asked Max to break the tension between Jack and Owen. Max wasn't prepared for the change of subject, so his response was one of confusion.

"Do you live in the Housing District is basically what I'm trying to say."

"Oh, no."

"Are you a foreign exchange student?"

Max didn't know where he was going with this line of questioning. "No."

"Why are you in Creston a day early then? The other students aren't supposed to come until tomorrow."

"Part of the long story, I'm afraid," Owen said. Max appreciated his new friend coming to his aid once again, but the twins were able to piece it together.

"I know who you are," Jack said, bringing his flame a bit closer. "I didn't think Mom was being serious when she said it, but I guess she had to have been."

He moved the flame right in front of Owen's face, causing the boy to duck away from the heat.

"No doubt came to visit the scene of the crime, huh, memory boy," Jack said. "Find anything useful?"

"No, actually," Max responded, only somewhat lying. The thread of his shorts had been a good find, if not a very useful one. "That's why we were just heading back."

"We were?" Casey said. Max nodded in a way that said he wasn't going to change his mind, so Casey slid his shirt back on, dejected. Max nervously followed Owen as they glided past the twins. The flame danced in his direction, leaping from Jack's fingers and taunting him as they left. Sand turned to grass under his feet, and the smell of the river faded away.

"I hope practicing your Elemental magic is worth it," Owen said to the other twin, who was still close. Jack had already taken his shirt off and started wading out into the water, the flame held high above his head. "You can't always take up the whole river."

"You might be glad that we practice as hard as we do someday," the other twin said. "When Cassius Flynn finally decides to slide down those mountains, we're going to give him a tougher fight than any of you ever will."

"If Cassius Flynn ever comes down those mountains, no amount of practice is going to save you," Owen said.

"Besides, we might be more useful than you think," Casey said.

"Are you going to look into his memories while he stabs you in the chest?" the twin scoffed.

"No," Casey said. "But we could help in other ways."

"Or maybe you're both delusional for thinking you have a chance," Owen muttered.

"Well, I'm sorry if I haven't resigned myself to dying just yet," the boy said, his thick eyebrows scrunching inward. "But we're going to keep getting stronger until that day comes. And until Sages and Healers stand a better chance against Flynn than we do, our practice sessions will take priority over your midnight swims. Sorry, Price."

"Cassius Flynn?" Max asked.

"A story for another time, maybe," Owen said, still looking angrily at the twins. "For now, we really should get back."

As he turned toward the river, Max noticed Jack rising above the surface of the water. It was slow at first, but then he shot up, riding atop a tower of water that must have been twenty feet above the rest of the river. Then, the tower vanished as abruptly as it had risen, and both Jack and the twenty-foot wave fell back beneath the calm water, leaving nothing but a ripple. Max was in awe, but Owen's grip on his shoulder broke him from the trance, and before he knew it, they were trekking back to the hospital.

"Jack and Ivan Fender," Owen said. "Their mom works in city hall year-round as Undersecretary, so they live in the Housing District just down the street from me. Ivan can be alright when it's just him, but Jack…"

"I know what Jack's like," Max said, reflecting on how unpleasant the twin had been.

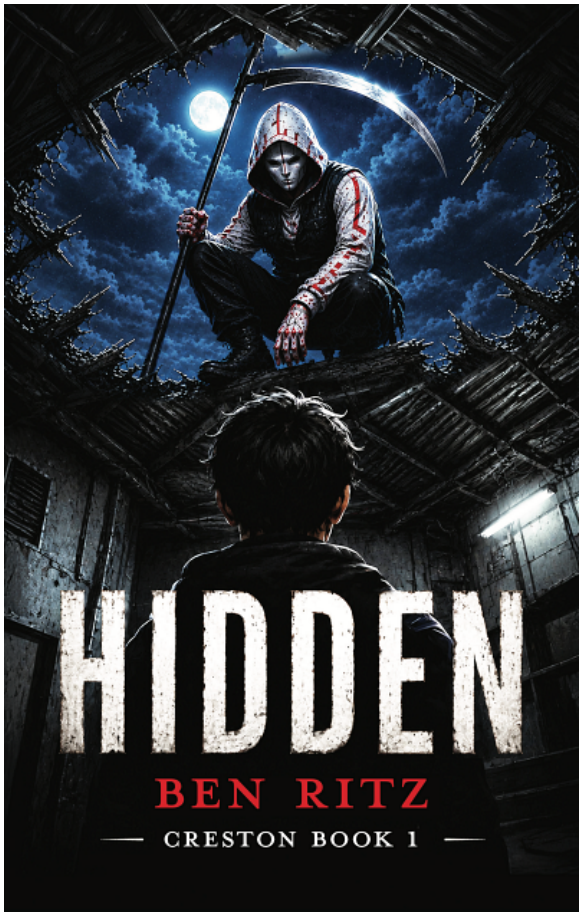
"Both of them are Elementals," Owen explained. "The branch of magic that can control fire, water, air, and earth.

They're damn good ones, too, since they're always training and hogging the river. I didn't know they snuck out at midnight to practice some more."

Owen veered off the main road since the streetlamps burned more brightly and frequently the closer they came to the Housing District. Max silently thanked him, for he didn't want any more run-ins tonight.

"If you don't want to be with the twins in class all year," Owen said, "you better pray you're not an Elemental."

Max agreed with him at first, but then thought back to the flame that burned straight out of Jack's hand. How it had seemed to hover just slightly above the skin to prevent any burning. The thought was replaced by the twenty-foot wave that Jack had sprung from nowhere. It was looming over the world, able to collapse on anything and anyone. It was power—and not in a philanthropic or truth-seeking kind of way. It was pure: less limited, more brutal.



A boy with amnesia washes up on the shores of Creston while a masked villain and a mystery savior grapple for war and peace. The boy and the town must figure out how it all connects before the scales tip towards war.

Hidden

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