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The Eden Conspiracy

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Introduction

In a world scorched by its own excesses, the echoes of civilization persist only as fractured memories and haunted landscapes. The earth, once brimming with wild, hopeful abundance, now stands as a harsh monument to cataclysm—its cities vanishing beneath tides, forests reduced to ash, and its people forced into desperate enclaves clinging to the ruins like barnacles on a sinking ship. Among these survivors drifts Mara Ellison, hardened by loss and relentlessly pragmatic, her days spent scavenging for sustenance and shelter in the shell of what was once her home.

The enclave Mara calls home is a tenuous society stitched together by the need for mutual survival and the constant threat of violence from outside—and, increasingly, within. People whisper nightly around guttering fires of a place untouched by the world's decay, a rumored sanctuary called "Eden." For most, these stories are a fragile shield against despair; for Mara, they are dangerous delusions, distractions from the unyielding reality. She still searches the faces of the desperate arrivals for her missing family, who vanished at the first sign of collapse, and each fruitless search further cements her skepticism.

Yet the legend of Eden is inescapable. It weaves through every conversation, every dark barter, and is carried on the lips of the dying—a hope that smolders where all others have burned out. The desperate cling to it, drawing maps in the dirt and offering up artifacts that might be clues or clever forgeries. The myth is a currency as powerful as any blade, a force capable of binding—or breaking—the battered communities that survive.

Mara's existence is defined by routine, vigilance, and an armored heart. But even she cannot ignore the growing sense of decay: supplies dwindle, tempers flare, and the enclave's fragile order threatens to collapse beneath the weight of too many ghosts. There are days, in the cold dark, when even Mara wonders if the world has nothing left to offer but the long, slow decline into extinction.

When a desperate, wounded stranger crashes into Mara's controlled world bearing what appears to be proof—real, tangible proof—that Eden exists, everything changes. As outside threats close in and the promise of sanctuary becomes something to kill for, Mara is thrust to the center of a dangerous game, forced to confront the truth behind the legends and the secrets within her own bloodline.

This is the world of "The Eden Conspiracy"—not merely a wasteland of violence and ruin, but a crucible where strength, hope, and betrayal collide in the search for something both ancient and new. The journey Mara embarks upon is more than a trek

toward a lost paradise; it is a test of what humanity must lose, and what it must reclaim, when the end of the world is only the beginning.

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CHAPTER ONE: Ashfall Dawn

The dawn in the outskirts of what was once Denver was less a rising of light and more a slow, reluctant retreat of pervasive grey. Ash, fine as flour, coated everything – the cracked asphalt, the skeletal remains of high-rises, and the huddled shacks of the ‘Iron Veil’ enclave, where Mara Ellison had etched out a grim existence for the past seven years. Her breath plumed in the frigid air as she checked the perimeter fence, its razor wire a rusty testament to desperation. The scent of woodsmoke, damp earth, and something vaguely metallic – the lingering signature of the world’s decay – clung to her threadbare scavenged jacket.

Her routine was as ingrained as the grime on her hands: wake before the sun, check the defenses, then head out with her pickaxe and a handful of ration bars. Today, however, the air felt heavier, not just with ash, but with an unspoken tension. Whispers had been circulating for days about increased ‘Road Wolves’ activity to the south, and the last supply run had returned with more empty promises than salvaged goods. Even the seasoned scavengers, usually a stoic bunch, carried a twitch in their eyes.

Mara moved with an economy of motion, her gaze sharp, missing nothing. She noticed the fresh gouge marks on the outer wall, too large for any local fauna, too irregular for a stray piece of debris. Something had been attempting to breach. She knelt, tracing the impression with a gloved finger. Not just one something, but many. The faint scent of burnt rubber and something acrid – a distinct signature of the motorized gangs that plagued the wastes – made her stomach clench.

She rose, her hand instinctively going to the worn leather grip of the battered pistol tucked into her waistband. It was an antique, a .38 revolver that jammed more often than not, but it was *hers*, a familiar weight against her hip. The memory of her father teaching her to load it, his calloused hands guiding hers, flickered through her mind. He’d always said, “A weapon is an extension of your will, Mara. Make sure your will is clear.” Her will was clear enough: survive.

Inside the makeshift common area, a collection of salvaged bus shells and tarp-covered lean-tos, the usual morning chatter was subdued. Scraps of conversation floated to her: “...seen shadows near the old overpass...” “...rations cut again by a quarter...” “...another family gone, probably tried for the mountains...” The mountains. That was where the legends of Eden usually started. A place of untouched greenery, clean water, and fertile soil, hidden deep within the Rockies.

Mara scoffed inwardly. A convenient fairy tale for the weak, designed to give them a

reason to keep breathing when the air itself tasted of death. She'd heard the stories since she was a child, before the bombs and plagues had finished what climate change started. Her parents, always pragmatic, had dismissed them as old-world fables, remnants of a desperate past. Her younger sister, Elara, had been fascinated, though, drawing crude maps of what she imagined Eden to be, a paradise with impossible waterfalls and glowing flowers. The memory was a dull ache.

She joined a short queue for the morning's water ration, a few gulps of filtered, gritty liquid from a rusted cistern. Old Man Fitz, his face a roadmap of wrinkles and soot, grunted a greeting. "Morning, Mara. Hear you found some good scrap yesterday, near the old stadium."

"Barely enough to mend a leak in the south wall, Fitz," Mara replied, her voice rough, like gravel. She didn't encourage small talk. It led to questions, and questions led to vulnerability. "And a nest of those mutated rats. Had to use half my reserve bullets."

Fitz nodded, his gaze scanning the horizon. "The world's getting hungrier, Mara. And so are the men who walk it. Heard a new one's moved into the old railyard. Calls himself 'The Iron Hand.' Not one for negotiation, they say."

Mara felt a cold knot tighten in her gut. The Iron Hand. Rumors of his brutality had preceded him for months, carried on the wind like ash from a distant fire. He was a warlord, a collector of misery, known for his cold efficiency in seizing resources and crushing any who resisted. His arrival so close to Iron Veil was a clear escalation, a shadow stretching over their precarious existence.

As the morning wore on, Mara gathered her tools. Her pickaxe, heavy and reliable, felt like an extension of her own stubborn will. She strapped a scavenged backpack to her shoulders, its contents minimal: a small first-aid kit, a water skin, a few more ration bars, and a battered compass that no longer pointed true north, but served as a comforting anachronism. She preferred to scavenge alone. Less risk, less chatter, less chance of someone else's mistakes becoming her problem.

She was nearing the main gate, a collection of corrugated metal sheets and rebar, when she saw the commotion. A small crowd had gathered, a ripple of hushed whispers and urgent gestures. Mara's senses sharpened. Danger. Something new. She pushed through the cluster of ragged figures, her hand already on her pistol.

In the center of the circle lay a body. Not one of theirs. This one was a stranger, sprawled awkwardly on the ash-covered ground, his clothes tattered and unfamiliar. He was young, or had been, his face gaunt and streaked with blood and dirt. A deep gash bled sluggishly from his temple, and one leg was bent at an unnatural angle. He was barely breathing, a shallow, rattling gasp.

A few meters away, scattered on the ground, lay a small, metallic box, dented and scarred, but intact. It looked like something out of a forgotten museum—a pristine, almost alien object in this landscape of rust and decay. Mara's eyes narrowed. It wasn't the body that caught her attention so much as the object. It had a strange luminescence, an inner glow that seemed to defy the dim morning light.

"He just collapsed, Mara," a woman named Lena whispered, her eyes wide with a mixture of fear and awe. "Fell right out of the ashfall. Like he appeared from nowhere."

Mara knelt beside the stranger, ignoring Lena's rambling. She checked his pulse—weak, thready, but there. His chest rose and fell with agonizing slowness. As she leaned closer, she noticed something clutched in his left hand. A small, tarnished silver locket. It was open, revealing a faded photograph inside: a woman, young and smiling, standing in a lush, green landscape, a background impossibly vibrant, unlike anything Mara had ever seen.

The locket was undeniably old, the image inside faded by time, but the details were startlingly clear. Verdant foliage, impossibly tall trees, and what looked like a perfectly blue sky, unmarred by ash or toxic clouds. It was the kind of image used to illustrate the legends of Eden, the kind Mara had always dismissed as elaborate hoaxes. But this... this felt different.

As Mara stared at the locket, the stranger's eyes fluttered open. They were a startling, intense blue, even through the film of pain and exhaustion. His lips parted, and a raw, guttural sound escaped. He tried to speak, but only a desperate rasp emerged. His eyes fixed on Mara, a flicker of urgency in their depths.

He lifted his hand, the one clutching the locket, and tried to push it towards her, his strength failing him. His gaze shifted, almost imperceptibly, to the metallic box lying nearby. Then, with a sudden, agonizing gasp, he pointed a trembling finger at the box, his eyes wide with a desperate plea. "Eden..." he choked out, the word barely a whisper, before his eyes rolled back, and his body went limp.

A collective gasp swept through the small crowd. Old Man Fitz crossed himself. Lena let out a whimper. Mara remained unmoving, her gaze locked on the still, pale face of the stranger, and then to the small, glowing box. "Eden." The word hung in the ash-filled air, heavy with a weight Mara had never expected to feel. It was more than a word; it was a ghost from a past she had tried to bury, a sudden, blinding spark in the pervasive darkness she had accepted as her reality. The stranger had brought the fairy tale to their doorstep, and with it, a terrifying question: what if it wasn't a fairy tale at all?

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