

THE EDEN CONSPIRACY (BOOK #2) EXCERPT

Prologue: Ben Voltolini

The battalion of soldiers presented themselves for inspection, and Ben Voltolini paced before them with measured steps. The Tribunal stood at his back, the soldiers at attention before him. They stared straight ahead, like robots.

"Lieutenant Colonel," he barked. The commander snapped his legs together. Voltolini went on, "Did the mission succeed? Have the refugees been successfully eliminated?"

"Not all of them, sir!" the Lieutenant Colonel nearly shouted. "Their caves are destroyed, and we estimate almost ninety percent of them are dead. The others... escaped."

Voltolini paused in his pacing. *One-one thousand. Two-one thousand. Three-one thousand. Four.*

"Escaped?"

"Yes sir!" shouted the Lieutenant Colonel.

Voltolini lowered his voice, and brought both of his own feet together, leaning toward the soldier. "To where?"

"We do not know yet. Sir!"

Voltolini pursed his lips. "I see. And how did these—ten percent, you say?" He resumed pacing. "How did they escape exactly?"

"We believe there was an—imposter among us. Sir!"

The air in the room grew thick.

"Oh?" Voltolini purred.

The Lieutenant Colonel fidgeted. "Corporal Ramirez was found dead. And stripped of his uniform. Sir."

Voltolini pursed his lips. "And who was wearing that uniform, if not Corporal Ramirez?"

"We do not know, sir!"

"Take a guess."

The Lieutenant Colonel hesitated. "Will Anderson has not reported for duty in several days, sir."

Voltolini inclined his head. "Anderson." He paused, looking back at the Tribunal. "Anderson..."

Jefferson Collins, the Speaker for the Tribunal, took a tiny step forward and cleared his throat. "A recent Enemy of State, Your Excellency. We presented him to you weeks ago for elimination. But because he is extraordinarily skilled at detecting and exploiting weaknesses in computer systems and networks, you elected to spare his life—"

"Ah, yes, yes, Anderson," Voltolini waved him off. "Engaged to that reporter who also vanished, right?"

"Yes sir," murmured Collins, "but we told Anderson that we had her captive to ensure his continued cooperation...."

"Right, right, I remember him," Voltolini cut him off. "I understood he was performing beautifully, though. Thanks to him, we've infiltrated New Estonia's mainframe and have Control Center construction underway on the ground there as we speak, isn't that right?"

"Yes, Your Excellency," said Collins, shuffling his feet. He paused, and his eyes flitted about the room before he spoke again. "But—"

"Why the hell did we send a guy that valuable on a mission to blow up some caves in the first place?"

Collins's eyes flitted around the room even faster and he shuffled his feet once before taking a tiny step back in line with the rest of the Tribunal. Voltolini whirled to face the Lieutenant Colonel instead.

"Well?" he demanded.

"He—snuck in, sir. Unfortunately we've been unable to locate the fiancée, and we suspect that Anderson discovered that she is still at large. Our hold over Anderson was therefore...weakened."

Voltolini opened his mouth and closed it again, his face expressionless. "*He snuck in.*"

No one dared to reply.

"Hurst," Voltolini said, looking back at the Tribunal and focusing on a man towering six foot eight, with a jaw like a horse. "Please take the Lieutenant Colonel into custody."

The Lieutenant Colonel's eyes grew wide and his breath shallow, but he did not move as Hurst seized him by the elbow with one enormous hand and dragged him from the room.

Hurst was the Tribunal's Chief Executioner.

When the Lieutenant Colonel and Hurst disappeared, Voltolini turned back to the battalion before him. "Major," he said to the man who had stood beside the Lieutenant Colonel, "Congratulations on your promotion."

If the Major felt shaken, he did not show it. "Thank you, sir!"

"Among the bodies found in the caves," Voltolini went on, "did you find the terrorist Jackson MacNamera?"

The Major hesitated. "No, sir!"

Voltolini nodded. "I see." *One-one thousand. Two-one thousand.* He turned back to the Tribunal, this time focusing on the Chief Technology Officer. "Barrett," he barked at a middle aged woman, "We need to tighten security. The bullet trains from now on will require that the brainwaves of the individual correspond to the ID chip used to board."

Barrett nodded swiftly. "Done, sir."

"How long will it take?"

She hesitated only for a second. "The technology exists. Implementation should take—forty-eight hours at the most." Her eye twitched as she said this. She knew her team would have to work around the clock to deliver on this promise, and even then everything would have to go perfectly according to plan. If she failed, Hurst would haul her off next. But the Potentate would not tolerate reasonable deadlines requiring ordinary working hours when there was a terrorist organization on the loose. This she knew.

"Excellent," said Voltolini. "You also told me last year that it was theoretically possible for us to upgrade the brainwave technology to target the brainwaves of a specific individual and customize their subliminal messaging."

Barrett balked visibly before she caught herself. "It's... technically possible, but it will take months to create the technology—"

"I want it in a week," Voltolini said, and smiled. She sucked in a breath, and smiled back.

Collins wrung his hands and cleared his throat, taking a tiny step forward. "Sir," he squeaked, "As you know, we've already changed our entire security so that the rebels cannot penetrate our databases again. But... that may not stop Will Anderson for very long. He is an extraordinary man."

"That is why we need targeted signaling as quickly as possible," Voltolini turned his deadly smile upon Collins, who shuffled back into line.

Voltolini turned again to face the battalion. "The remaining refugees are on foot. They cannot have gotten far. Fan out, comb the area. When you find them... show no mercy." He turned back to the Tribunal and said conversationally, "Anderson was admirably compliant until now. That's interesting." He looked at the Major. "The reporter, Brandeis—was her body found in the caves?"

"No, sir!"

Voltolini nodded. "I can only assume that she's with the surviving refugees, then. If she's there, take her alive. She may be useful." He paced. "As for their presumed leader, Jackson MacNamera—he will come to us, sooner or later. Count on it."

