

The year was 2156. The tension between the US and China reached its end when a communication error resulted in detonating several nukes in major US cities, America and its allies fought back and by the time the dust settled the whole world was nothing more than a nuclear-radiated wasteland.

Those who survived the first nukes escaped underground to special fallout shelters and remained there hoping that one-day humanity will get to live on the surface once again.

That day never came.

Instead, humans adapted to life underground and eventually created "Second chance "

A virtual simulation world was first invented to help patients who were failing to adapt to life underground but then it quickly transformed into a full virtual experience. " Second chance" allowed humans to escape their horrible reality, escape their mistakes, and live in a virtual world where they could experience the warm sunlight once again, where they can run in the green meadows. A world where nuclear war never occurred. A world that soon replaced reality.

It....It...It is a fucking joke.

Instead of facing its past mistakes, humanity chooses to run, to escape. I can't accept this ...I can't accept living in this convenient lie. I want the ugly truth. I want to see the real ugly terrible world.

I want to witness the mistakes of my kind. Accept them and build a brand new future on top of them.

" A true second chance "

These thoughts were what motivated me to escape my underground Bunker. What motivated me to venture into the wasteland in search of something real, of something genuine.

No...No... This is a lie. These thoughts weren't what made me make my final decision. No, I managed to gather the courage for such an endeavour all thanks to "Her".

A girl I met in " Second chance". Her name is "Karolina". We spoke every single day and it didn't take me long to fall madly and completely in love with her. We might have met in a fake virtual world but my love for her is as genuine as the pain I feel in my knees right now.

I decided to rest on a large rock and stare at the horizon. Maybe I can see something from here?

I looked around me in anticipation but the only thing that greeted my eyes was an empty desolate wasteland.

Fuck.....Fuck.....Did I make a wrong turn somewhere?

I took up a large map from my backup and started checking my location but it was nearly impossible to read it. The landscape has been completely altered by the nuclear explosion that hit the area.

My throat was getting parched so I reached inside my back up once again and took out a steel bottle.

"Shit, I'm running low on water. I didn't think the trip will take this long " I spoke to myself as I started drinking.

"We meet in the weirdest places, don't we my friend? " A sudden voice echoed from behind me.

I quickly turned around and pointed my gun at the source of these words. A person with a weird dark coat and a green hat greeted my eyes.

"W-Who the fuck are you? " I yelled at the weird man as I reloaded my gun. Is he a "Looter "?

" You're as energetic as ever my friend " The weird geezer spoke as he smiled.

" Don't come any closer , I'm not letting you steal my supplies " I quickly replied as I tightened my grip on the gun.

" Relax my friend. I have no interest in your supplies. I'm more interested in you " The weird man spoke as he shook his head in ridicule.

" Who are you? What do you want from me? "

" I want to see an end to this cycle. A different ending to this tale. A much happier ending. Won't you agree that watching the same episode over and over again is " boring " my friend " the odd man replied with a sad look on his face.

" What the fuck are you talking about you weirdo? Get up and turn around before I shoot you. I'm not kidding " I quickly spoke with an irritated look on my face.

" You're trying to get to " The garden", aren't you ? " the odd man spoke, this time a serious look decorated his face

" What? How do you know about this? "

" I also know you plan to meet someone there." a woman". A woman who is on a very similar journey " the strange man added.

"I'm not fucking kidding old man. If you don't start talking soon. A bullet will be lodging itself in your brain " I yelled out once again wondering if I should shoot this weirdo just to be safe.

" I know where "The Garden " is. Where you can find this legendary place, this untouched paradise " The odd man replied with a big grin.

"....."

" Oh, I see I finally piqued your interest my friend ( chuckle). Yes, I can take you there. After all, that's where I came from " the odd man added as he scratched his beard.

" You...You came from "The Garden". It... it really exists? " A small city that was never affected by the nuclear war ... A Legend every person heard from his elders. A secret paradise that exists in this terrible world.....It ... It really exists?

The strange man didn't say a word instead he picked up his cane, started walking in front of me, and said :

" Come on my friend. Let's paint a new ending to this hopeless tale "

Before I could make sense of what was going on. I found my legs instinctively moving and I was walking after the strange man. I couldn't exactly explain why but a strong feeling in my heart told me to trust him.

A man who didn't look like he belonged in this world.....This was my first impression of this person.

" Why are you helping me? what do you want in return? " I asked the strange man as we started climbing a rocky mountain.

" I've told you already. I want a different ending " The man replied. Even though he was using a cane, his climbing pace was oddly quick. Does he even need a cane?

"What the hell is that supposed to mean? A different ending? " I quickly replied. Is this geezer on something?

" Have you ever observed a rat in a maze? The way it moves and struggles to find an exit. Don't you find it fascinating? The rat will continue moving in the maze without a rest. it will reach one dead end after another but it will never give up. Why do you think that is ? "

" Huh? " I replied in confusion. Yeah, this geezer is definitely on some strong shit.

" A rat will never give up because it believes that an exit awaits it in the end. That his work and energy will be ultimately be rewarded. The rat will never get frustrated but do you know who will? "The observer ", Yes the observer will be frustrated watching the rat. Simply because, unlike the rat, the observer knows that no reward or exit awaits the rat at the end. Such a thing really bothers the observer so what would he do? exactly my friend, the observer will either stop observing or he would forcibly create an exit to the rat. This is why I'm helping you " The old man finally finished his monologue and started chuckling.

What a fucking weirdo! I didn't follow the entirety of his weird speech but I'm pretty sure he was calling me a rat or something. What an asshole. But if he truly knows the location of "The Garden" then I think I can put up with his shit for now. I will just keep my gun on the ready in case he tries anything.

The odd man and I continued climbing the rocky mountain until we reached a high cliff. The odd looked in the horizon and spoke :

" Do you see this forest below? If we manage to traverse it. A new ending will be written and your eternal punishment will end "

" Can you speak normally for the once old man? Are you saying "The Garden" is on the other side of this forest " I quickly replied as I rubbed my forehead? This person is giving me a major headache.

The strange man smiled and nodded. Why couldn't he just say this? Why does he feel the urge to speak nonsense every time he opens his mouth?

Using a tight rope we climbed down the high cliff and reached the entrance of a thick forest. Alright, I'm almost there....Just wait for me, Karolina.

I gathered all of my strength and started walking through the forest. My right hand was tightly gripping my gun the whole time but while I was carefully moving forward. The weird man didn't seem to be on alert, It looked like he was just going on a stroll. What a carefree person.

Maybe he noticed me looking at him for he grinned and parted his lips :

" Is she really worth it? The woman you're going on this journey to meet? "

" Shhhh don't talk to me, this forest looks very dense. Something could easily jump on us and how the fuck do you even know I'm meeting someone there " I replied as I continued observing our surroundings.

" You're from Bunker F-13, right? You a very healthy male and your shelter are very low on males, most of the males present there suffer from severe Vitamine D deficiency and other illnesses. you could have your pick of any woman living there. So why are you risking your life for "this specific girl " The odd man added. The fact it seems he knows way too much information is really creeping me out. Who the hell is this man?

" How do you know all of this shit? Did you use to live in Bunker F-13? And what's with this "healthy male " crap. I'm not some animal who exists only to breed " I quickly replied in irritation.

" I just thought I'll get to know you better my friend " the weird geezer spoke mimicking a sad pout.....Is he trying to look " cute"? Maybe I really should shoot him.

I turned around to yell at the strange man once again but at the very same moment, a certain thing jumped in front of me. The thing howled at me as he stared at me with its bloodshot eyes ..... " A wolf" .....No a "Mutated wolf ". I pulled out my gun and pointed it at the monstrosity that was thirsting for my blood.

But all of a sudden 5 more mutated wolves jumped at me. Fuck.. fuck...fuck I only have 3 bullets left in my gun. This is bad....This is very bad.

## The point of view of Bunker D-09 resident " Karolina Porze"

I suppressed the urge to scream as I poured alcohol on my wound. I couldn't scream and risk alerting any possible dangerous creature around me. I got up on my feet and continued walking through the dense woods.

How long has it been since I left the shelter ? 4 days ? 5 days? I lost track but based on this handmade map I found at the shelter I should be very close to the location of "The Garden ".

God, the thought that such a place could exist fills my heart with excitement. No calm down Karolina, we're not there yet. I should remain focused and continue moving.

I wonder how far " he" got by now. His bunker is further away from our destination so I should be arriving there first. I really wish there was a way for me to contact him....to make sure he is doing okay but It's hopeless.

" You're as energetic as ever my friend " A sudden voice caught my attention, I turned around and pointed my bow at the source of these words.

" I see you're as a distressful person as he is (chuckle) " The person speaking these words was a man wearing a long coat and a green stylish hat.

" Don't step any closer. Who are you? What do you want? " I yelled out as I aimed my arrow straight at his head. If he tries anything I shoot.

" I was going to say I'm here to help you but I realize that's rather pointless. Unlike him, you never needed any help. Yep, a true heroine walking a straight path (chuckle) " the man with the stylish hat spoke as he smiled.

" What are you talking about? What do you want from me? " I yelled out.

" Nothing, I just wanted to meet you and wish you good luck. I shall go now. He must be reaching a point of desperation right about now " The man with the stylish hat spoke as he started walking away. I kept aiming my arrow at him until he completely disappeared. What a weirdo ....What was he doing here anyway?

I holstered my bow and continued walking through the forest.

After a few hours of continuous hiking, I reached a weird-looking metallic gate. Wait, could it be?

I pulled out my journal and started looking through the information I gathered. Yes, I'm on the right path. there should be a switch nearby. I started looking around the wall until I found a rusty-looking button.

I gently pushed the button and stepped away. At first, I heard nothing but then all of a sudden the large gate started sliding open. Yes, yes .....I'm almost there.

I cheered myself and started going through the gate when I heard a weird click coming from somewhere. I looked around me but there was nothing out of the usual so I decided to ignore it and proceed carefully.

I'm almost there. I'm almost at "the Garden". Please show up very soon. I will be waiting for you, Darling.

### **The point of view of Bunker F-13 resident**

I fell on my knees as I tried to catch my breath. The stench of blood and fur tickling my nose. Somehow I did it. I managed to take out all of the mutated wolves and I'm still in one piece.

" That was a thrilling show I never get bored of this part of the episode (chuckle) " the weird man spoke as he patted my shoulder.

" Glad you enjoyed it, old man. We almost died but I'm glad at least you were entertained " I spoke as I distanced myself from the weird man. This asshole didn't even attempt to help me with the wolves. He just stood there with a stupid grin on his face. I definitely should shoot him now.

I finally stood up on my feet and decided to continue moving through the forest. I've used all of my bullets so if anything jumps at me right now I'm dead. I need to move very quietly which is a very difficult task with I'm accompanied by this loud weirdo.

" Hey, can you keep that mouth of yours shut until we're out of danger old man? " I said as I addressed the weird man

" I can, but that would be pointless because we won't face any more danger in this forest " the odd man replied

" Oh really? So you're a fortune teller on top of being a drug addict and a creepy weirdo? " I spoke with a mocking tone.

" Not at all. I only know what the timelines have shown me. What awaits you during the straight portion of your path " The odd man replied with his usual nonsense answers. Why do I even bothering conversing with him?

" What do you think is responsible for our fate my friend? The answer that would come to your mind is " Luck" .... " choices ". Yes, our fate is being written by the choices we make and influenced by pure random luck. Life is no different than a casino game in this regard but what if there is another factor. An important factor that decides what path we walk on. What ending we're meant to experience.....What if everything is predetermined from the very start Would you fight your fate? or would you accept it and try to adapt? What if you're never fated to find this untouched paradise they call " The Garden " ? " the weird said.

" You better not be stirring me in a wrong direction. The only thing keeping me from shooting you is the fact you claim you know the location of "The Garden". If I realize you been lying to me this whole time it won't end well for you " I replied as I turned around and addressed the weird man.

" The Garden does exist, in fact, you should turn around right now " the weird man replied as he pointed in front of me.

I quickly turned around just to be greeted by a large metallic gate. A gate? Yes, this is what Karolina was telling me the other day. A large metallic gate should be present in the path to the Garden. If I remember correctly she said I should look for a switch.

I looked around the gate until I found an old-looking button. I quickly pressed it and waited.

Then all of a sudden a loud clicking noise vibrated inside my ears. Is the gate opening up?

But instead, a strange door appeared. What the hell is that?

I attempted to approach the strange door when all of a sudden it opened and a large metallic statue appeared. The large statue suddenly started moving, in his hands were gigantic blades. What the fuck is this "thing"? A robot?

" This is a security sentinel, it has sensed an intruder and now it's attempting to eliminate it " the weird man suddenly spoke with a serious look on his face.

" Intruder? What intruder? " I quickly replied in confusion.

" You. It wants to kill you " The weird man spoke as he took off his long coat to reveal the two shining blades on his back. He reached both hands and drew the blades pointing them at the giant robot.

" This is it, my friend. Our chance for a different ending. Your chance for a happy ever after " The strange man spoke as he threw a pouch next to my feet.

" There should be enough ammo there. If you want to live, If you want to change your fate, if you want this cycle of death and suffering to end. Pick up that ammo, reload your gun and fight alongside



me " The moment the odd man spoke that he jumped forward with such incredible speed and slashed his blades at the giant robot.

"Fuck .....fuck .....fuck ...What the fuck is going on? My head hurts from all of this shit. How did I go from fighting wolves to a giant robot " I spoke to myself as I quickly took the ammo in the pouch and reloaded my gun.

" How is my gun going to do anything against this metallic abomination " I pointed at my gun and took a shot but just liked I expected the bullet deflected from its armour as if it was made of rubber.

" That won't work my friend. I will distract the security sentinel while you go behind it. a manual override should be present there ...You need to shoot it "

" What? Go behind him? "

" This is our only shot. it's either this or the usual bad ending "

I cursed my luck one final time as I moved quickly behind the giant robot ...the weird man was engaging in a sword fight with it and keeping it busy. Shit, here going nothing.

I ran as fast as I could pointing my gun at the back of the giant robot but the moment I was close enough, the giant thing suddenly noticed me and swung his sword at me. I lowered myself as I rolled on the floor avoiding his blades and without even getting up I pointed my gun and took the shot. The bullet went through and penetrated the back. The giant robot stood still for a second before it fell on the ground motionless.

" Perfect, fucking perfect .....you did it my friend you broke the cycle " the weird man yelled out excitement. This was the first time I hear him curse.

I got up on my feet and started adjusting my clothes as the odd man continued to tap me on the shoulder and laughing in excitement. What is he so happy for? Not that it bothers me or anything. After all, it was thanks to him that I managed to avoid death but I wonder why he didn't help me with the wolves earlier.

I came closer to the large gate and pressed the button once again.

But the moment I did that, a bright laser beam emerged from the edges of the gate and passed right through me severing my body in half. I fell on my back convulsing in pain, blood pouring from my mouth.

W-What just happen? I.....I don't understand.

With my last remaining strength, I lifted my gaze to the weird old man, his previously excited happy smile was now replaced with a grim stare. He came closer, kneeled next to me, and spoke :

" I'm sorry my friend. We failed. The ending is different but the result is the same. Your death couldn't be avoided but I will not give up...I will not stop until the cycle is broken. Until you reach "The Garden". Until you meet her. I will not stop until you escape this maze. I promise you, my friend. I promise "

I didn't completely understand what he was talking about but his words felt oddly comforting. I closed my eyes one final time as I thought about the only person that mattered to me:

"I love you, Karolina. Please forgive me "