

CHAPTER 1 — SHOULD WE STAY OR SHOULD WE GO

Secrecy, being an instrument of conspiracy, ought never to be the system of a regular government

—Jeremy Bentham

YEAR 2080 CE, 20 MAY — NASATON, PLANET EARTH

The cavernous hangar bristled with security. Steely drones buzzed overhead in the clear blue Floridian sky while dark-suited security guards stood like statues under the broiling sun. Everything was shipshape. It had to be, for the President of the United States of North America and his staffers would be descending any second into the bowels of the Space Ark *Mayflower*, the gleaming behemoth whose task it would soon be to shuttle the selected ones from the death throes of planet Earth. An ant-like figure, dwarfed by the mammoth beast, paced nervously at the embarkation point. Tall, lean and sporting a flattop bleached blond by the summer sun, Dr. Daniel Radu, Project Manager for the NASA Space Ark program waited, impatient to be back on the job.

She was beautiful, his masterpiece. He had overseen every aspect of her creation, from the original concept to the propulsion systems to the colour of paint in the cabins. *Mayflower* lived in Daniel's heart, in his every breath. Even in the breath under which he cursed, when the Space Agency's Administrator tasked him with the upcoming dog and pony for the president. Oh, he had fought back—there was so much riding on it in these last few weeks to make sure his baby was ready for her virgin flight, and he was running out of time. But he knew he was beaten when his boss pulled an ace from his sleeve—that old chestnut that he'd been in NASA almost since the day they moved from Cape Canaveral to the newly constructed secure compound of Nasaton.

Back when coastal flooding proved the old adage that no one can hold back the tides. When humanity had to admit they had failed and the great snow-covered ice caps of the Arctic gave in to the relentless warming of the Anthropocene and melted into the annals of history. Fairy tales and legends of the white

bear who prowled in the blizzards of the eternal nights, and hunters who skidded through snowdrifts as high as a house on motorized sleds—he had listened to them as a child.

Now it was too late—Earth was dying. At first, she whimpered, almost like a puppy losing its milk teeth, but no one heard, no one listened. Ever so gradually, a new and painful warmth crept into Her watery depths. Slowly, persistently, it swirled about the globe, carried along on surging currents, until the combined might of the oceans rose in revolt. Whipped into a frenzy, the waves crashed endlessly, victorious in their battle against Earth's landmasses. The cries of the planet continued—louder and louder—still unheard against the lapping of the seas as they claimed the breakwaters that had been hastily constructed in a doomed effort to protect coastal cities. Dykes and dams and pumps were all good in the Middle Ages when the seas lapped benevolently against the shores.

But how times had changed! And one by one, those busy centres of life and commerce strung along the coast like pearls began to fall under the watery waves. The oceans were reclaiming the ancient conquests of Terra Firma, and now no one could deny it, for the Deluge left buildings and parking lots empty but for the fishes. Too late. They had waited too late to thwart the ambitions of Poseidon and his watery realm.

From this danger, with entire nations submerged, came a new threat: millions of displaced persons rose up as relentlessly as the waves themselves, surging across the globe in a tsunami of asylum. Terrifying they were in their needs, and the two northern nations of America quickly joined forces to staunch the flow of the human flotsam. Ah, the birth of the United States of North America, forged in the fire of the Refugee Wars, two nations bound in their fear of the unknown.

Yet even then, there was a flicker of hope. For the United Nations, that great obsolescent offshoot of a war that took place in the old days of the Twentieth Century, finally rose out of its slumber to thrash out a plan to save humanity. Now that no choice was left, the leaders of the world whose minds had been poisoned by greed and power were forced to hear, to listen and to acknowledge the truth of the situation. For days, the politicians and ambassadors gathered in the General Assembly of the United Nations, listening uncomfortably while the big brains laid out a path to salvation, all the while bickering about money as thousands were left fending for their very lives. In those heated moments, the UN gave birth to the International Space Ark program, a radical measure to deal with the unknown destiny of humanity.

For by shuttling hundreds of thousands to an extraterrestrial colony, they believed that those left behind on the home planet wouldn't outstrip Her dwindling resources.

But to Daniel, that was the irony of the situation: for to journey hundreds of millions of miles from the home planet, to consign oneself to living within a protective bubble, was to embrace the unfamiliar. As one of NASA's senior engineers, Daniel's job was to burst the bubble of that unknown, and he knew that he damn well needed to be able to explain it to those at the top. Even now, as he paced relentlessly across the gleaming floor of the embarkation point, the outside world still trembled in the shadow of death. For not only had a flood of refugees streamed across the globe, but a deadly virus marched with them, one that had been decimating Earth's population now for over nine months.

Very few people knew the truth of what had killed half of the planet's population, other than it was brutal and it was fast. The great minds of the scientific world had been beating on the door of the bioengineered disease, but no one was answering. They called it the Chimera Pandemic: take one part Ebola and splice it into one part Anthrax spore. Sprinkle it liberally and voilà: certain death. Those bioterrorists, they knew what they were doing with their pet Chimera—hey, you can catch it through the air—that's how Anthrax spreads; or it'll greet you on the doorknob—that's Ebola for you. Splice the two together into a bacto-viral mutant, and you've got a one-two knockout punch.

You don't even know you're dying, but next thing you know, you're the Grim Reaper, spreading it unknowingly with abandon. And then, it's on to your eternal rest. First though, pat yourself on the back—you've done your job; you've given the gift that keeps on giving. For their pet Chimera was designed to rid the world of the great unwashed masses. A terrorist-inspired Malthusian plan to reduce the globe's population to levels so the land could once more support humanity. Daniel stopped pacing for a moment and said a prayer that the president and his party were wearing masks.

A willowy brunette with shining brown eyes burst from the shadows, almost scaring Daniel out of his skin. "Tara," he gasped, trying to quiet his heart. "What the hell? The president's due here any second." Tara Kóbor, the Nobel Prize-winning astrophysicist who had discovered the find of the century—an Earth-like planet cuddled up in the Goldilocks zone of its star—was wearing a grin as wide as the Grand Canyon.

“You heard the news, right? I mean, the broadcasts are on fire. They’ve developed a vaccine! And whoever’s on the first shuttle flight is top priority. That means…”

He could hear heavy footsteps pounding on the hangar floor: time to play show-and-tell. Taking her by the shoulder, Daniel shepherded his friend to the bulkhead door. “It means you gotta get outta here. We’ll celebrate later,” he promised.

Just then, a bevy of bodyguards swooped in, all earpieces and dark glasses, and Daniel stood back as they robotically carried out their duties. No need really; NASA’s Chief of Security had seen to that. Out of the corner of his eye, Daniel spotted Tara’s husband, Lt-Col Pallav Kóbor dwarfing the president’s team as he walked them through the hangar. He could hear the click click click of the cameras as the president approached with his staff trailing behind like good little shadows.

Showtime, he mumbled to himself, wiping the sweat from his palms on his cobalt-blue NASA tunic. Pasting a smile on his face, Daniel greeted President Mallory with the traditional elbow-bump and nodded in recognition to his entourage. Shepherding his flock about the gargantuan space vessel like a proud father, Daniel extolled the virtues of his progeny, all the while the president nodded blankly as if his mind were already on the Martian Colony.

“This beast here’s the heart of the Space Ark—ion propulsion systems that’ll get her from LEO—Low Earth Orbit that is—into a Solar Orbit. And once she reaches perihelion, then the light sails deploy, and she’ll be rocketing through space at speeds of up to 200,000 kilometres per second.”

President Mallory knitted his eyebrows together, a look of confusion on his bloated face. “Peri-what? Listen, Doc. What I need to know is when it’ll be ready for launch. Can you answer that?”

With his Spidey-sense tingling and the staffers shuffling uncomfortably, Daniel came to the conclusion that sometimes white lies were acceptable. Even to the man who runs the most powerful country in the world. “A month,” he lied and watched Mallory’s face turn purple.

“Cut it to half that. Got it?”

“We’ll do our best, Mr. President,” Daniel replied, knowing she would be ready well before that. Ready to fly, ready to flee.

Daniel was about to move on to the bridge of the mighty Space Ark when the president stopped in his tracks, and fumbling in his jacket pocket, he pulled out a glass bar that shimmered to his touch.

Sighing in exasperation, Mallory grabbed Daniel by the arm and pulled him aside. “Listen, Doc,” he wheezed, “I gotta thank you for the tour but this is important.” He wagged the glass back and forth in front of Daniel’s face before jamming it back in his pocket. “Is there someplace private where I can speak to my staff?”

“The entire Space Ark was vacated for your tour, sir. I can take you back to the loading bay, and...”

“Yeah, that’d be fine,” Mallory interrupted, seemingly impatient to be rid of his tour guide. Upon reaching the bay, he dismissed Daniel with a flick of his hand before turning his back on the Space Ark’s Project Manager.

Well, that went... not so well, Daniel mumbled as he made his way back to the engine room. *I guess he didn’t get an A in high school science.* He could still hear Mallory’s voice booming down the hall when he noticed it—really just a dark patch on the carpet, and he rubbed at it with the toe of his boot.

Oh Christ, what a time to find a leak!

Flashlight in hand, Daniel began tracing the drip back to its source as the sound of laughter echoed down the hall. That was when he heard it. Uncertain at first, he almost sank into the carpet and slunk silently forward.

“... one-way trip to Mars,” Mallory boomed.

What?

A woman’s voice rose in anger, only to be staunch by the harsh tones of the Secretary of Defence flowing like a river of ice down the hallway, snippets of the treachery reaching Daniel who had silently melted into the shadows.

“...the pandemic’s incurable... barely any progress... spreading like wildfire... The USNA will cease to exist...we’ve got a golden opportunity to save ourselves...”

The irritation in the president’s voice was as loud as the Space Ark’s ion propulsion engines as he cut in. “The colony on Mars can only support a few hundred thousand people... before the migrants get in and contaminate us all. We’ve run out of time.”

The more he listened, the more Daniel's blood ran cold. Suddenly it all became crystal clear. They were being abandoned, all of them. And his creation—the Space Ark *Mayflower* that he designed, overseeing its teething pains and growing pangs—would be used to abandon humanity while the president and his cronies made their escape.

Inching his way back through the corridor, Daniel felt his stomach knot as the realization sank in. The scientists, they didn't know what they were doing, they hadn't a clue. There was no cure, nosirree, just smoke and mirrors. And then there were the bioterrorists: so excited at their horrific creation, their Chimera bacteriophage, that like kids riding a bicycle for the first time under their own steam, they got carried away. They just built it and sent it out there, their pet Chimera, to do its deadly duty. Figuring they could leash it when it was done killing half the world. Except they couldn't—they lost control. So Mallory said, gleefully bullying his staff into accepting the Dump the Earth, Screw Humanity plan.

And Daniel knew that he had not been born to be a victim.

With his head spinning, the drive home along the palm-lined avenue to his married quarters passed in a blur. Logically, he knew they were still safe—Nasaton was under strict quarantine while his team worked full speed ahead on the Space Ark project. Mechanically, he opened the door, kissed his wife Poppy and picked up his son, but nothing registered. Silently, Daniel climbed the stairs to his office, unaware of Poppy standing at the base of the stairs, tucking a strand of ebony hair behind her ear as he shut the door behind him. His mind numb, he vacantly stared at the holoscreen in his office. The news flashed by: images of happy people, dancing in the streets, celebrating the news. Strangers smiling at reporters, the pall of fear lifted. A vaccine. A cure for the Chimera Pandemic. Freedom!

Lies!

The sneering voice of President Mallory back in the Space Ark swirled through his mind: bullying, taunting, menacing.

I'll never allow this!

Reaching into his desk drawer, Daniel pulled out a bottle of Buffalo Trace and poured himself a few fingers. He sipped slowly as a plan began to form from the fog of confusion. Slowly, the wisps began to

coalesce—clouds joining into a raging storm, ready to rain down on the President’s Parade. That was it—he knew exactly what to do. The way ahead was clear.

Until a voice from below called out to him, tearing him from his reverie, disrupting his plans.

“Daniel! Supper’s ready.”

One last sip of bourbon before Daniel put on his game face. There’d be time to tell his wife later. But not now, not when he could see the glow of happiness in Poppy’s cheeks—for she had drunk the Kool-Aid and believed in salvation. And well he knew—the bitter taste of truth didn’t quite go with chili and rice.

A slow blush crept into Poppy’s cheeks, a coy smile on her lips as she gently planted a kiss on Daniel’s neck as he stood at the sink, suds foaming up his arms. The water washed over his hands, cleansing him of the sins he was planning in response to the Problem of the President. The transgressions that he planned with Machiavellian indifference that had so preoccupied his mind as he sat at his desk, had since been purged away by the fire of the chili, and he turned to embrace his wife in a soapy hug.

“What’s that for?” he chuckled, drawing in the fragrance of her perfume as it enveloped them in its delicate scent. It was Poppy who cemented his deal to dupe his nation’s commander in chief—his beautiful wife—for her, he would steal the stars from the sky.

“I’ve got some news I’ve been waiting to share with you,” she whispered softly, her hands linked around his neck. The smile never left her soft brown eyes as she guided his hands downwards. Daniel’s face lit up with surprise as his fingers caressed the round bump that swelled his wife’s belly.

“A baby? We’re expecting!” Overcome by emotion, Daniel swung Poppy off her feet, giddy with happiness. Exhilarated, he wondered if they would have a daughter, a playmate to their bubbly toddler Lewis whose cornflower-blue eyes were full of mischief.

That one split second of ultimate perfect happiness was destroyed when the realization that this little life, so defenseless, might never be born if the scheme in his mind were to be scuttled. For if he failed to thwart the Presidential Screw Humanity scheme, they would never leave the shade of the abyss where a backdrop of terror and war proved a fertile killing ground for the Chimera Pandemic. They could never hold their baby, for it would be six feet under, buried with them, their hopes and dreams.

“Poppy, we can’t, not now. You’ll have to terminate it. You know it’s not safe,” he mumbled in panic. The look on her face hit him like a locomotive in full steam. She said nothing for several seconds, holding his gaze in an iron vice.

“But we’re safe, Daniel,” she finally replied. “Your work’s kept us in isolation. And now, with the immunization program about to begin, it’ll all get back to normal.”

“Listen, I need to talk to you about something.” Daniel ran his hands over his cropped hair, in a glance taking in all his home’s smart devices and wondering who could be listening on the other end. Listening and reporting. He couldn’t take that risk.

That’d be the end of me, he thought. Guiding Poppy by the hand, he led her outside to the garden where they were shielded from the outside world by a tangle of flowering jasmine vines and tall swaying palm trees. Conch shells lined a gravel path to a teak bench that was flanked by two clay pots overflowing with brilliant green ferns while water gently trickled from a Tsukubai fountain into a stone basin nestled amongst small round river pebbles. The Radu family garden was an oasis of peace in Daniel and Poppy’s otherwise hectic lives, with Daniel proud of his green paradise.

Glancing about, he sighed in relief that the neighbours were safely tucked inside and out of range. For he was about to drop a bombshell. “You know that the project I’m working on is getting close to completion,” he started, pushing the vines back to reveal a stone bench sheltering amongst the greenery.

“I’m aware of that,” she replied as they sat side by side under the flowering canopy. “Deep space travel and all that stuff. Swing by the moon before rocketing off to find a home on Mars, maybe visit the stars; yeah, I know all that but... will you be out of a job afterwards? If that’s it, we can always cut back if it’s financial. I’m okay with that,” she replied, her voice thick with concern.

“Well,” Daniel stalled for time. Now the hard part began: to convince her that he had stumbled across the truth. That there was no escape from the Chimera Pandemic that raged across the world in a fiery blaze of death—he heard it directly from the presidential horse’s mouth. That the whole story of a cure was concocted by the world’s leaders to lull the populace into a sleepy inertia while they themselves would soon slip the surly bonds of Earth, escaping into space to be the first and only wave of colonizers on the Red Planet.

Already, the lies were growing ever greater, snowballing out of control as they gathered speed by spreading false hope. They had heard it that evening sitting in front of their 3D entertainment centre—vaccination centres were hastily being set up across the globe. Placebos to placate, at the ready to be injected into desperate people.

And Daniel was shockingly aware of it all—he was even part of it, having worked on the project to build NASA’s Space Ark, one of only three that were being constructed in cooperation with Europe and Asia, supposedly to shuttle a healthy portion of Earth’s population away from the land-deficient planet. Seemingly to heal the world, to give humanity another chance at making it right. Except that President Mallory and his fellow leaders had a very different vision in mind—one in which the rulers of the prosperous nations and the über-rich would be rocketed to safety on a oneway space journey to Mars, while impending death awaited the rest of the planet.

“It’s bullshit, Poppy,” he said as he looked her straight in the eye. “There’s no cure, no vaccine. We’ve been written off. Just food-in-waiting for the worms before our planet reverts to what it was a hundred thousand years ago, before the dawn of mankind. Last month, I overheard...”

Poppy shook her head and rolled her eyes. “Stop right there. You heard what President Mallory said tonight on the news. In a few weeks, they’ll start pumping out the serum. And with your job, we’ll be the first to get the vaccination. Everything’ll return to the way it was before. Hell, Daniel, you told me we were guaranteed a spot on the Ark you built!”

“Listen...I’m telling you the truth. I know this sounds crazy, but hear me out.”

“What’s gotten into you anyway? You’ve been coming home like a zombie, ignoring our son and now you’re feeding me some bullshit conspiracy theory.”

A wave of frustration surged over him and he knew that nothing but the long version would satisfy his wife. Taking a deep breath, Daniel launched into what he hoped would convince the Doubting Thomas of the Radu clan. “You remember learning in school how the oceans started to flood the coasts, and cities were lost under water? New York, Washington DC, London, Amsterdam, Vancouver, Mumbai ... These were once real cities. We’re not talking about the lost continent of Atlantis here. Entire cities, whole islands were swallowed up by the oceans as climate change became irreversible.”

Poppy groaned in exasperation and glared at Daniel. “Of course I’m aware of this! Every schoolchild learns that the melting ice caps raised the world’s ocean levels. But what does that have to do with us? I told you I’m having a baby; I never asked for a history lesson.”

“Okay, bear with me here. You know that there was a time when NASA was about 100 miles from here, on the coast of what was then the Atlantic Ocean. Well, around 15 years ago, when it became impossible to work from there anymore, the government created our secure village: Nasaton.”

“And we moved here just a few years after that, when you first started working on the Space Ark program. You remember, back when you’d actually be home in time for supper.”

Daniel nodded, his eyes sparkling with the thrill of discovery that his new job had brought in those early days. “Back then I wasn’t the project manager of the most important mission on this planet,” he chuckled, and throwing his arm about his wife’s shoulders, he pulled her close. “Back then, the focus was finding a planet within the Goldilocks Zone that could sustain human life. Not Mars, not one of the moons, but somewhere where we could establish a brave new world. You remember Dr. Tara Kóbor?”

“The tiny little brunette married to Goliath?”

“That’s the one,” Daniel laughed at Poppy’s description of Tara and her husband Lt-Col Pallav Kóbor. “Tara and her team found a Goldilocks planet in the Cygnus constellation. That was actually the place we were shooting for, but the progress of the Arks was way too slow. We kept hitting snags, and time was becoming more and more critical. That’s why the goal shifted to Mars,” Daniel explained.

Poppy snorted in irritation. “But it’s all gonna be all right. And we’ve always talked about having more kids. Lewis is three now...Daniel, we don’t have to wait. By the time this little guy’s ready to greet the world, everything’ll be back to the way it was. I mean, with the vaccine and the Space Ark being almost ready to launch with us on the virgin flight. What could go wrong?”

“Well... it’s not quite like that. Just think what’d happen if there was no cure for the pandemic. If people knew that they’d be dead within a few months, just think about the chaos! It’d be lights out for all of us. All this bullshit about the vaccine’s just to give us hope so that we go peacefully about our lives until we croak. False hope, Poppy. It’s gonna be the curtain call for the human race. And you want to be holding a newborn when the world goes up in flames.”

“Jesus, Daniel! Can you hear yourself? You’re imagining things...you’ve been working day and night; you’re barely getting any sleep. It’s no wonder you’re coming up with these crazy stories. Talk to your boss; he owes you a few days of vacation.”

Daniel sighed. It sounded ridiculous even to his own ears, and he knew that if he hadn’t heard it firsthand, he’d have dismissed the plot as pure fiction, another conspiracy plot put together by the media moguls wanting to sell their trashy magazines. But this was no story in a gossip rag, and so Daniel gently took both of his wife’s hands in his and calmly went on.

“Can’t you see? This baby, our baby... it throws a spanner into the works... that’s why I’m asking you to back up a little bit, okay? If everything does pan out, then... well, we’re still young.”

Bull sees the red flag. He forgot about that—his spitfire of a wife’s temper—so lost was he in thought: how to kick the presidential ass to the curb while staying true to his Space Ark’s purpose. It dwarfed the thought of a tiny fetus swimming carelessly in a warm, safe womb.

But Poppy—she did not. And suddenly his shoulders were pinned back as he faced the wrath of his wife. “So if it all pans out, as you say, we’ve got a first-class ticket to Mars. So what? Won’t the colony be able to handle one more small baby,” she screamed.

But when he said nothing in response, she shoved him away in disgust.

“Listen.” Daniel raked his fingers through his hair in frustration. “I was like you. I placed my trust in the democratic process, the integrity of our elected officials, and the objective reporting of the media. But we’re being played. Think about it, millions of displaced refugees are living in absolute poverty; hatred’s running rampant. Our own government’s denied thousands of asylum seekers sanctuary while we still get to live in luxury. People are dying every day on dinky little rust buckets trying to cross raging oceans, and we’re turning them away. You know where this’s leading?”

“I know all this. But right now, we’re being protected by our government. And I thought that as my husband, you’d be trying to protect your family. Not asking me to murder a defenceless little soul.”

“Can’t you just trust me on this one?”

With a shake of her head, Poppy exhaled sharply. “If you think I’m just gonna kill our baby without a better explanation, then you don’t know me, Daniel Radu.”

“Christ, this is über top secret, I shouldn’t even be having this conversation—they’re things that I haven’t said.” Daniel paused and took a deep breath, his hands nervously raking through his hair. “You know how we have those weekly briefings with the Chief?”

“Of course. You always bitch about how long they go on, while all you want is to get back to turning a wrench on your beloved Space Ark.”

Daniel stifled a grin; it had been years since he got real grease under his fingernails. “Yup, that’s about it. But, there’s a lot of stuff that gets ventilated at those long, boring butt-killers that’s not for public consumption. Need-to-know-basis kinda stuff.” He could see her dark eyes dilate as she moved in closer, interest piqued.

“So, a few meetings ago our Chief briefed us on Pop0... they’re a group of biohackers and one of the few terrorist organizations that don’t have inflated egos and claim responsibility for every attack that takes place. They actually prefer to fly under the radar and maintain a really low profile. At first, they were pretty innocuous, just a group of losers and misfits, playing with fire and putting it out. You know, hacking into the high-security vaults where genetic codes for the world’s most deadly diseases are stored and cooking up deadly concoctions—just for the fun of it—and then designing new drugs to counter their monstrous creations. Rejigging the biggest, baddest virus into something a hundredfold worse, then conquering it—it was all a game for them. That is, until the lure of the Rooted in Poverty rebels drew them in.”

He felt her hand squeezing his thigh as she leaned in close. “A lot of people are on the side of RiP, Daniel.” Poppy was ashamed of being one of them, supporting a rebel group whose aim was to balance the world’s population through the application of force. Deep down, Poppy believed that if RiP achieved their goals, they could live in safety, without hunger and without fear.

“The world’s overpopulated and it’s pretty much been destroyed by our ancestors and their careless disregard for the environment,” she began, unable to meet Daniel’s eyes. “With the oceans rising and the temperatures soaring sky-high, some of the best agricultural lands around the world have been either wiped out or rendered useless due to desertification. And now, food production’s concentrated only in a few countries—what are we supposed to do, Daniel? Keep on feeding everyone?”

Her eyes shone with the intensity and passion of the extremist, and Daniel turned his head away in disappointment as Poppy spouted the approved government propaganda.

“We both know governments tried to limit population growth in the past, but that failed, and there was no vision moving forward.” She took his chin in her hands, as if chiding her errant toddler. “I know it sounds cruel, but in the past, nature had a way of regulating things—people would starve during long winters, crowded conditions would usher in diseases that couldn’t be cured back then. All the advances that’ve been made over the last few hundred years... they were leading us in the wrong direction.”

Daniel started to object, knowing that some of his wife’s points were valid, but she shushed him into silence. “Let me continue, Daniel. For once, I’d like *you* to listen.” Daniel cleared his throat and nodded, uncomfortable with the direction this conversation was taking, uncomfortable with the realization that Poppy was on the side of RiP.

“All the work on genetic engineering led to drought. Insect-resistant crops caused a population explosion in places where people were already living on the edge. More people needed more food and more food needed more land. But the land’s gone now. And yes, there are people starving and dying but lo and behold, the internet tells them there’s a land of milk and honey across the pond. And the Promised Land closed its borders and the starving people had nowhere to go. Except back to where they came, and so RiP was born.

“Their idea will work! Keep the aid boats out and the population’ll stabilize at what the land can support. And as for the pandemic, a cure is on the horizon and even if it only reduces the severity, sooner or later, there’ll be herd immunity. You, me and Lewis, we’ll be packing for Mars soon. It’ll all work out in the end. We can trust the government Daniel—they’ve got a plan that’ll work—it’s all under control, you just got to believe. Don’t you see?”

“No, because what you’re seeing is a mirage. And it’s not going to end with us living happily ever after on the Red Planet,” Daniel replied sarcastically. “I was trying to tell you that Pop0 turned rogue when they joined forces with RiP.

“Those misfits infiltrated the Global Infectious Disease Research Labs, thinking they were smart enough to build the perfect deadly combo—a chimera bacteriophage—a bio-engineered bug with the genetic code for

the Ebola virus inserted into the Anthrax bacteria. This little devil was delivered to an unsuspecting world while they thought they had on hand enough antidote to reverse it once it took its toll. Pop0, RiP and their faithful followers would simply migrate into the pretty much vacant developed world, and Bob's your uncle. A brave new world for them. A shallow grave for us, if we're lucky enough."

Her brow furrowed, Poppy tilted her head towards her husband in confusion. "But I thought you said that there was no cure? No idiot would create something like that and let it rampage across the globe without first having a cure on hand. At least for themselves."

"And therein lies the problem with this pandemic gone wildfire. Like the Chief said, Pop0 fucked up royally. Big brother RiP didn't want to take the time to really thoroughly test antidotes on primates. It's kinda hard to quietly hide 500 monkeys in cages while you first try to kill them, and then try to save them. So, they went with lab rats. Rats, you know, they survive in sewers; they're probably the first warm-blooded critters that'd pop up after a nuclear holocaust.

"The guys in Pop0 screamed and shouted, but in the end they couldn't stand up to the rebel leader. When they deployed their designer cocktail of death, they started in all major city centres, just spraying the concoction out in the evening, letting the stuff happily float along and infecting anyone unlucky enough to breathe it in. The guys who spread it were local volunteers—totally expendable. They couldn't suit up for protection because that would've drawn suspicion, and they thought they'd be safe with a supposed antidote. But they weren't; they crawled back to their basements to die. Little by little, people stupid enough to believe in the rebels' mandate spread the poisonous cocktail everywhere. And once the designer bacteria got in your system, the viral component kicked in, making it transmissible via touch.

"And that's not the half of it! You heard of the crop failures all over the Middle East and Northern Africa? Not caused by nature, my dear, but RiP. All RiP. The scientists with Pop0 bioengineered diseases that wiped out the major cereal crops. That plus the droughts caused by climate change ... well, you know the story there. Millions of people dying of starvation. The World Food Program unable to get into the countries due to rebel activity. Refugee camps filled with rapes, violence, and suffering. Those camps made it even easier for Pop0 to infect massive numbers of people with their deadly designer disease."

And the symptoms of the pandemic were at first easy to dismiss. Just like a common cold: headache, coughing, a bit of a fever. The bactovirus had been bioengineered so that it was transmitted quickly and easily. It was only later, after the period during which it could be somewhat treatable, that the pandemic showed its true colours as patients succumbed to a grisly death, blood seeping from every orifice as they suffocated to death in pools of their own bodily fluids.”

“I’ve never heard anything about this,” Poppy retorted. “All the news is filled with the famine over in East Asia and how rebels are denying aid ships entry into port cities.” Images of emaciated women clutching babies whose bellies were swollen from the effects of malnutrition, along with the rushing tide of immigrants appealing for help had played over and over again on the airwaves.

“Of course, that’s what they want us to see,” Daniel explained. “The Powers To Be have been feeding us stories about RiP and their philosophy that an imposed famine will wipe out enough people so that humanity can live comfortably on the shrinking landmass. And it’s in the world powers’ best interests that We the People aren’t aware of the real danger. The government wants us to remain calm while the Space Arks are readied for launch. And once the Arks are gone, the world’s most powerful leaders with them, we’ll be left to fend for ourselves as the realization kicks in that the fake vaccines were just stalling tactics.”

The skepticism abating, Poppy screwed up her face questioningly. “You keep saying that the world leaders are going to flee Earth and leave us behind. I doubt even the Chief would be aware of this. So how’d you find this out?”

A gentle breeze kicked up some leaves underfoot as Daniel turned to his wife. “Last month,” Daniel continued, “when President Mallory and the members of the National Security Council were touring the site, he stayed on the *Mayflower* to answer an urgent request. Or so he said. I didn’t think anything of it. Earlier, when I was giving them the dog-and-pony show, I noticed a leak in the hydraulic system in the main engine compartment. Nothing serious, easy to repair. So there I was hunched over with my flashlight checking the lines, when I heard some heated voices raised in an argument. That’s when I overheard all this stuff about the conspiracy and the pandemic and the fake vaccine. At first, I convinced myself that I was misunderstanding, so I started recording it. Some of the guys were dead set against leaving Earth while there was still a chance. But Mallory—he was crystal clear. The *Mayflower* would launch with world leaders

and those who'd paid a king's ransom for their voyage into safety. The Secretary of Homeland Security was the only one who had the guts to argue long and hard before Mallory told her to shut the fuck up or she'd be left behind to rot with the rest of us. That kinda killed the discussion."

Poppy took a deep breath to dispel the thoughts spinning through her mind, while a part of her wanted to trust the government, to put her faith in the messages that spread across the media sprinkling out the fairy dust of hope. She wanted to block her ears to Daniel and his absurd conspiracy theories all the while the little voice inside her head forced her to listen to the uncomfortable truths that were tearing apart her oasis of calm.

But Daniel was relentless, popping the bubble of contentment where the promise of a cure was waiting for them. "I kept it to myself at first, trying to think about what to do until I came up with a plan. It's not like I could go online and accuse Mallory of deserting us, not unless I wanted to spend the little time I have left on this earth in some jail cell. The main thing is that we're safe for the moment, but how long do we have before someone screws up?"

"What do you mean by screw up?" she questioned.

"If anyone leaves this safe little enclave, we're pretty much all doomed—that is, unless Nolan and his team of geniuses can crack the designer bug's defences. They've been working on a vaccine in tandem with big Pharma, but even that old windbag Nolan was scratching his head in confusion over this sudden 'discovery of a miracle cure'. But listen, there's a small ray of sunshine in all this. NASA has a secure Holographic Telepresence Link with the two chief project managers of the Space Arks under construction at the European Space Agency and the Sino-Russian ROSCOSMOS. After our last weekly HTP concluded, I stayed back to 'congratulate Polina Orlova on the birth of her grandchild'. Jan Wouters, my ESA counterpart, and I both know that Polina has no kids, so the two of them figured out something was up."

"Weren't you worried someone would intercept your discussion?"

"Nah, that room's swept clean on a weekly basis; it's soundproof, bombproof, and we switched to the emergency landline, so our signal couldn't be picked up. No one even remembers that old landline. We were safe. I told them what I heard and asked them to put some feelers out, but in the meantime to start delaying their Space Arks till we could figure out what was going on and come up with a plan."

“And so?”

“Turns out it’s not just North American politicians who’re turning tail. The leaders of both the European Union and the Sino-Russian Socialist Republic have been making preparations for a real long camping trip, like one that is out of this world, and I mean literally. Polina was able to find supply lists of kit for hundreds of top bureaucrats and their cronies within the SRSR. And one of Wouters’ colleagues has a father who’s a member of the European Parliament. He was telling his son that he’d like to take him and his family on a surprise trip; he gave him a list of what to bring. It was like he was setting out with Columbus to discover America. Very suspicious. That’s when we started colluding to derail their misguided flight to freedom. And now, you my dear wife—you gotta promise me—you can’t leave Nasaton. Our lives depend on it.”

Poppy cringed, thinking how she’d already left to buy some new baby clothes just this afternoon, believing in the safety of the promised vaccine. She debated whether or not to say anything, wondering if the deadly bactovirus was already coursing through her veins.

“Because let me tell you something my dear. Us engineers and scientists, we just don’t research and build things you know. We plan too. And do we have a plan!”

“And Daniel,” she interrupted, “that plan will include our baby. Otherwise, I’m not going. End of. You got that, Mr. Project Manager?”

“Well... if you’re up to being the first woman to give birth in deep space,” he grudgingly accepted. “The *Mayflower* team and their families will be joining us in our little sanctuary of safety. D-Day’s a couple of days away. Supplies have been stockpiled, and launch checks have been run. We’ve kept it a secret not only from our families, but also from the brass—letting them think that the systems aren’t ready and feeding them a pack of lies. Now, this can’t come off the rails. I know I can trust you, Poppy,” Daniel said, forcing a smile. He felt there was little reason to be happy, knowing that they were abandoning Earth to its fate. There wasn’t going to be a happy ending for everyone, but he could still pull this rabbit out of his hat to save his family.

“Christ, Daniel, it’s terrifying. Stay here and die. Or steal a Space Ark and probably be killed before we leave Earth’s orbit? Did you ever think that we may be shot down?”

“No way, my dear. The thing has plates on it that’re able to withstand nuclear blasts. We’ll be safe enough.”

“You’ve really thought this through then?” she queried, knowing that if even the smallest thing went wrong, they could end up in a floating coffin, drifting forever in space.

“The best and brightest minds of the planet are on the project. We’ve planned it down to the last paperclip. So let’s go back inside, you can get Lewis’s bath ready, and I’ll read him his favourite bedtime story afterwards. Then we can watch old reruns of The Simpsons. Even after 60 years, they’re still funny.”

Daniel started to get up, but was pulled back by Poppy. “So, Mr. Big Shot, where will be my new home? Or are we just going to drive around—do you even drive in space—until we find the right spot to set up house?”

“Deneb7, my dear, we’re heading to Deneb7. A nice warm planet just like Earth. But it’s going to take us a little over three years, so you might want to pack an extra coat.”