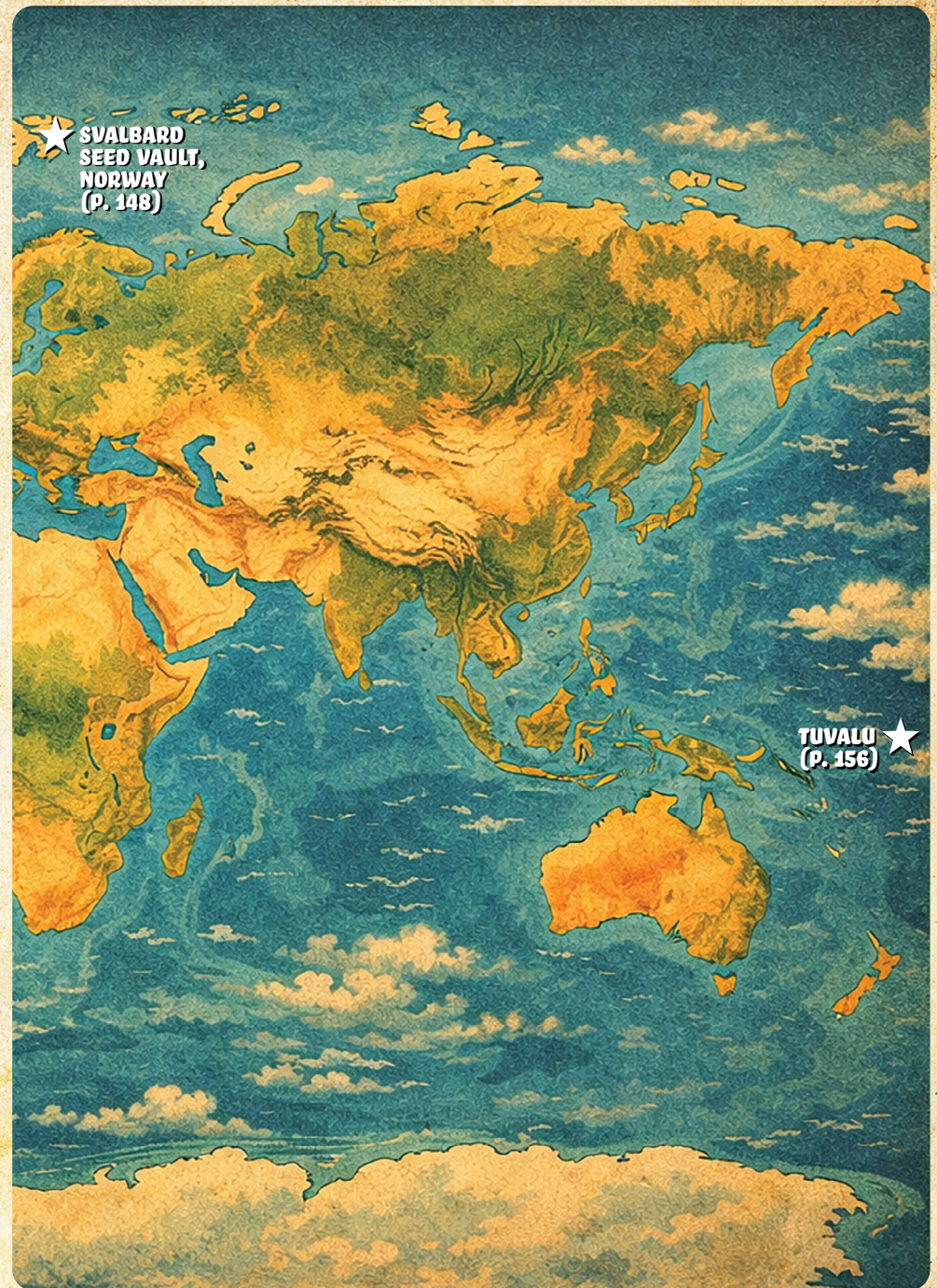




AWAITING
ARMAGEDDON



★ **NORWAY** ★

SAVING THE WORLD, ONE SEED AT A TIME

SVALBARD SEED VAULT



Let's hope this one stays off limits, because if anyone ever needs to crack it open, it means we're all in trouble.

Perched on a remote island halfway between mainland Norway and the North Pole, this Arctic fortress is carved deep into the permafrost. Built by the Norwegian government in 2008, it's one of the most secure places on Earth, and though it may look like a Bond villain's lair, its purpose is far less sinister.

This is the Svalbard Global Seed Vault – a sort of Noah's Ark for plants. Inside the well-secured vault are duplicates of seeds from gene banks all over the world: wheat, rice, maize, potatoes – millions of samples representing nearly every major crop variety known to agriculture. It's humanity's ultimate insurance policy: a backup copy of the planet's food supply.

Gene banks themselves are nothing new, and most countries have their own to preserve plant material. But none come close to the scale or security of Svalbard. Inside, a constant temperature of -18°C (-0.4°F) keeps more than a million seed samples in deep freeze. Carved into solid rock and surrounded by snow, the vault can keep its goods frozen even without power. Each seed is sealed in a custom three-ply foil packet, packed into boxes and neatly stacked on metal shelves deep within the mountain. If the worst ever happens, the seeds can be thawed, planted and brought back to life.

The vault was designed so gene banks worldwide could store duplicate samples and ensure that vital crop varieties wouldn't vanish in the face of war, terrorism or natural disaster. That backup system was tested far sooner than anyone expected. In 2015, Syria became the first nation to withdraw seeds after the civil war devastated the gene bank of the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA) near Aleppo. The centre had safeguarded around 148,000 seed samples, and when conflict broke out, staff worked against the clock to send duplicates to Svalbard. Thanks to their efforts, about 80 per cent of the collection survived in the Arctic vault. With support from new facilities in Lebanon and Morocco, ICARDA scientists were later able to regenerate and replant the seeds, proving the vault's purpose isn't just symbolic: it actually works.

Doomsday preppers have long existed on the fringes of society – your friend's cousin's neighbour with a bunker full of canned beans and a plan for surviving Armageddon, World War III or an alien invasion (sometimes all three). But lately, it feels like we've entered a new golden age of prepping – only this time, the tinfoil hat brigade has been replaced by tech billionaires. The so-called crackpots now have private jets, data centres and luxury compounds, in preparation for (ironically) AI gone rogue.

And not to sound too alarmist, but with climate change, wars, pandemics and our soon-to-be AI overlords, it's strangely

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comforting to know that someone – especially people as sensible as the Norwegians – are prepping for the planet.

While entry to the vault itself is strictly off limits, you can visit the site on a guided tour – though, perhaps surprisingly, you'll need to bring a gun. On Svalbard, it's a legal requirement for anyone venturing beyond the main settlements to carry a rifle. Not because the locals are part of some doomsday cult, but because of something far bigger (and furrier): polar bears. You're not meant to shoot them, of course – the gun's just to scare them off. Failing that, if you do fire, expect a full police investigation. Polar bear attacks are serious business up here – but so is saving the world.

