

## Earth Sagas - Chapter One

By Evan Kusko

Diego perused the multiplicity of brightly colored boxes and scientifically-labeled packets strewn about the toppled toolshed. His premonition that traveling uphill to what were once expensive private properties had begun to pay dividends as he painstakingly cataloged and collected another plant specimen that he had not yet encountered. At one point, Diego might have had some amount of acute hesitancy to trounce upon what was once someone's home and take what was at one point their property. According to his father, they used to refer to this damnable act as "trespassing" and Diego would have been met accordingly with cameras, sirens, and armed men. Fortunately for him, the homeowner and the men were all dead.

A now-dissociated Diego placed another packet of White Cauliflower seeds into a tough metal and plastic case. It was meticulously organized and contained the consummation of Diego's research into the newly-resurgent plant life that had and continued to be instrumental in his family putting down generation-spanning roots of their own.

He didn't quite have it in him to laugh at the "put down roots" pun, but there was enough energy to exhale sharply from his nose. This brief lightness was suddenly met with an internal wince. *Fortunately for him, the homeowner and the men were all dead?* The thought ran through his head again and Diego immediately felt a little crushed as he once again worried that he was losing a bit of his humanity. He and his family had always hated how old fiction made it seem like the apocalypse would bring out the worst in people, and these seldom but poignant intrusive thoughts did little to put his busy mind at ease.

Diego was ready to leave the toolshed now. Whatever amount of shade the failing structure afforded him was now lost to the superheated polyvinyl that surrounded him. Not only was he considering that this heat may have made the plants he was collecting unviable, but he knew for certain that it was disconcerting enough to take a toll on the quality of his recordings. He grabbed the remainder of the unsorted seed packets and stashed them away into the "uncompiled" section and briskly crouched under the shotty threshold of the dilapidated shed.

Upper-crusty neighborhoods like these had been stripped for food and supplies likely even before Diego was born, and all that remained of the remainder of the estate were some terribly weathered stone columns, entirely disused electronic appliances half swallowed up by dirt, and a profusion of ivy so dense and encompassing of the estate's state of unkemptness that it seemed to be trying to cover everything up in its entirety.

The road back home was empty, dangerously jagged, and relatively long, yet Diego's relief at being out of the shed-microwave was reason enough to be excited about the trip back. Not only would he be returning home to his family, but what buildings were left provided enough shade to make the trip back comfortable. Diego produced a small radio from his bag and began fiddling with the controls with just enough precision to make it seem like he knew what he was doing. His little olive-colored box let out a few short coughs as the voice inside sputtered to life. The poor little machine remained incomprehensible for a few minutes until Diego got closer to habitation.

"*Evening... (Evening) Reads*". A familiar jingle played as the voice of his favorite station rose to clarity.

"Welcome back, everyone. Tonight we'll be continuing our voyage through Middle Earth in *The Hobbit*. For those of you only joining us this evening, I'll provide a brief summary of what's transpired thus far in our new adventure..."

Each night around sunset, Diego tuned his radio to this same station to hear Ross Fergeson read another chapter of the piece of fiction he'd uncovered this week. It was the best way for Diego to interact with books and fiction, as even when there were bookstores and places to purchase stationary it was common knowledge that reading from bound books was going the way of the vinyl record. Tolkien certainly wasn't Diego's favorite, yet the Fellowship's landing at Lake-Town was still so wondrously captivating that the sun had crept to the horizon and he had walked several miles before realizing how far he strayed during his time foraging.

*Evening Reads* drew to a close only a few minutes out from Diego's folks, and as the sky's normal yellow plunged into a dull ocher as the light was thrust from it he was well met by another young person whom he could immediately tell had been listening to the very same broadcast.

"Can I carry something?" Veronica asked matter-of-factly. Diego could not only feel, but see the sweat lines paring down his dusty tee. Veronica's right arm was still in a sling after an unfortunate wrangling incident, but Diego knew he could do better to receive help. The sweat that had accumulated on the straps of the backpack only seemed to bother her for a second and she quickly shifted the conversation to dwarven barrel-riders escaping the forest elves.

Diego, Veronica, and their families built themselves a niche as one of the only groups of individuals who had taken up farming. Most groups flitted from town to town, looking for what had been left behind and moving on to find the next place to dig for resources. Ever since Diego had uncovered a handful of well-preserved biology textbooks and a handful of painfully

outdated copies of the *Farmer's Almanac* and was able to use what he had learned from them to start a permanent food supply, his family and the families that he lived with had become more than willing to create permanent shelter out of a few disused, but otherwise preserved, metal cargo pods. Diego remembered his grandmother saying that they reminded her of "tiny homes" from when her great-grandmother was young, but it was evident that her joke belied some amount of familiarity that she had lost coming back to her.

One of the biology books responsible for giving Diego his start described how humans' domestication of livestock was the death of the hunter-gatherer lifestyle. While he rarely doubted the authority behind the old texts, he preferred to postulate that it was agriculture that was responsible for the domestication of humans. While neither his family nor the peoples he had encountered throughout his life were violent or even distrusting, Diego and Veronica often could confide in their latent fear that the next group they run into may be less than as accommodating as those they'd already ran into.

While the infrastructure certainly existed for *Evening Reads* to be broadcasted, gas power for heating was essentially nonexistent. This had the positive effect of leading Diego and the rest of his community to prepare food and feast together in front of a wood fire. At one point, they had considered trying to set up an electric range indoors, but each family had decided not only were the power requirements too severe, but their potential to miss chances to see one another during mealtimes.

Veronica peeled the backpack off of her shoulder and it slumped onto a workbench in a small pod-building that housed gardening equipment, but more importantly the breadth of their botanical research. Thus far Diego had managed to hide his excitement to share what he had uncovered with Veronica behind their vibrant chatter regarding the Fellowship's journeys across the Misty Mountains, but now Diego's excitement could be bound no longer.

"We can break bread next week", Diego stated. Veronica looked back at him with a confused look that belied an inner excitement.

"The yeast ferment doesn't smell sour this time, and considering that the Beer-Plants have continued to grow beyond the first harvest, we should be able to start baking next week." Despite how matter-of-factly he spoke, Veronica could immediately discern the sheer joy that his tone belied. Her normally somewhat stoic countenance formed a gleeful smile.

"The fact that you've already made this much progress before the weather's turned cold is remarkable", Veronica replied, similarly stoic despite her inward elation. "You said that there was more you had found, too, right?"

Diego's reply was as candid as it was genuinely glad, as he got to explain everything to someone who cared as much as he did. "I found more information that has helped me to confirm that the tomatoes should be edible. I think the piece I found claiming that they were poisonous was outdated even in its time", he explained.

"We're still never gonna quite take you seriously after the Chicken Corn, though", Veronica joked. "That might have been the closest we've ever come to traveling again".

Diego could tell from her tone and playful smile that she was fooling around with him, but it certainly didn't make him feel any less responsible for an unfortunate incident where his family realized that they didn't have the digestive tract necessary for the gravelly feed corn that had managed to crop up in the wild.

Their conversation wound down and they joined their family for supper. The sky never dimmed the same way as it did in the old books that Diego had read, and the temperatures were never quite what the almanacs predicted. The plants never quite grew with the height or vigor that he expected, and sometimes his experimentation had proven to have actual consequences at times.

He would take it in stride; this world was his to accept, and accept him back he knew it did.