

THE FIRES OF ENTIA

EPISODE TWO

BY SIDDHARTH JAI GOKULAN

CHAPTER 1

The Escape

We didn't want to overwhelm them, so only me, Tiracha and the king entered the palace. It looked like an average royal palace, but more modern and colourful.

In front of us was Sharhak himself. To his right was a grave reading:

"Prarthana S R: 1990-2022 – This poem was inscribed at her site of death:

Go make some new disaster,
That's what I'm counting on.
You're someone else's problem,
Now I only want you gone."

Whoever killed her probably really hated her if they went to the trouble of inscribing the lyrics to "Want You Gone" at her death site.

Sharhak stood to greet us. First, he set his eyes on the king. "Greetings, Veshras. It has been a while." "Your name is Veshras?" I asked the king. He sighed and told Sharhak, "I told you not to use my name in the public!"

"Why're you so keen on hiding your name anyway? Do you expect people to just call you the king? Anyway, I hope these two filled you in. We need your help to free the orb. We need to unite our forces if we want to stand a chance against the monster that is preventing the orb from radiating its power like it used to," Sharhak said. "So, they were telling the truth. Our army is waiting outside," the king said. And with that, the five of us marched out.

We got some devices labelled “MAGS INDUSTRIES” to stick on our armour. Supposedly, they would create bulletproof force fields around us. I tested it by trying to punch Tiracha, and it sadly worked just fine.

I was asked to lead them because my ship’s computer could track the creature. After walking through more endless desert landscapes, we reached a city. A proper, modern city. Well, calling it modern wouldn’t give it enough credit. This city was what people on Earth in the 80’s thought the future would be. Flying cars, body recognition, you name it, they’ve got it. Sharhak put his hand on a nearby pedestal and a flying self-driving limousine flew down to us. I climbed in without thinking twice and soon, we were off.

After about 10 minutes (which felt like 10 seconds in the flying limo), we reached what looked like an old, dilapidated house. Me and Tiracha went inside while the others waited outside. It even looked like that on the inside, as if this was an innocent old wooden hut. Then we spotted a staircase. It was old and made of wood like the rest of the house, but it seemed to go down forever. My phone said our destination was 10 metres below us, so I assumed the staircase was the way to go. I was right.

In reality, the staircase was a spiral, not one wooden slope. As we descended, the area seemed to grow darker and darker. By the time we were 9 metres down, it was pitch black. When we reached the bottom, we found a worn-out lightbulb illuminating a metal door with a sign on it that read, “KEEP OUT”. Of course, we went in. That was a huge mistake.

The door locked behind us and the fireplace of the “basement” lit out of nowhere. But this flame wasn’t orange or red, it was light blue. Before we could move or do anything, the fire started spreading to the rest of the building. I may have been immune to it, but I didn’t want to test that. As I panicked and looked around, Tiracha nudged me and pointed at a vent on the wall opposite to the fireplace. It was just low enough and big enough for us to crawl into. It looked claustrophobic, but it was either that or getting burnt alive, so I just crawled into the vent.

Guess what? The vent system had wooden walls. After crawling for a while, we smelt burning wood behind us and an awful stench ahead of us. For some reason, this vent connected to a sewer system. With wooden walls. We emerged in the sewer and ran, not daring to look back. The sewer was like a maze, but we were only allowed to take one path since the drainage streams were too wide to jump over. We reached a window we could escape through, but it was too high. I looked around and found some wooden crates. Me and Tiracha piled them to form a staircase which was just high enough to reach the window. We looked down from the windowsill and found a flimsy-looking rope ladder leading us down. Then we looked behind us and saw that the fire was getting dangerously close to the crates. We had no choice but to trust the ladder.

We emerged in a room that looked a lot more like a typical elaborate trap. Pistons to crush us, branching paths, and of course, fire chasing us. We considered which path to take when the wind blew down the left pathway, prompting us to go left. And the wind was right, because the piston here was too slow to crush us and I heard a loud thud from the other pathway. After repeating this process two more times, we finally reached an exit door. A door labelled “EXIT” in bright red Comic

Sans letters was probably a trap, but I didn't really think about that when I was being chased by fire. Turns out, it wasn't a trap. I had successfully escaped... and arrived right in the monster's lair.

Tiracha pulled a strange device out of her pocket and pushed a button on it, then placed it on the ground. She pulled me back just in time for the entire army, Sharhak and King Veshras to materialise there. Still, we were no match for the sheer size of this (apparently male) beast. He looked like a four-eyed dinosaur who had just taken a bath in the sewer we came here from. He laughed. His laugh was dry, menacing, and lifeless, and it made me feel hollow inside. That one laugh killed most of my confidence. He said in the same dry voice, "So... the humans and the birds unite. How wonderful. Now I can destroy all of you right here and right now! Want your precious orb's power back? COME AND GET IT!"

He shot one of his dog-sized fingernails at us. "Poison nails. Remarkably effective, they kill in five seconds! Here's some advice, just let one hit you and make your death less painful... and slow." The Entiad army pulled out bows and arrows and the human army pulled out their rifles. They fired volleys of arrows and ammunition at his eyes in an attempt to blind him, but he swatted them away effortlessly, sometimes hitting someone else with the arrows. We weren't the only ones with bulletproof force fields, apparently. With one swipe of his hand, he wiped out a substantial chunk of both armies. I shot my laser beam at one of his eyes and managed to blind it, but I had to wait for it to recharge before firing again. This enraged him and he swiped at us furiously, killing a few more in the process. My laser beam recharged and I thought about just repeating this to blind him completely, but Tiracha had a better idea. After I

blinded his second eye, Tiracha took advantage of him not being able to see to his left to deflect one of his poison darts at him. It took a few tries, but she eventually managed to get one in his mouth. He unknowingly swallowed it before realising what happened. He laughed that cold laugh again and said, "Using my own fingernails against me? Pathetic- *sick coughs* Are you serious? Did you just *cough* poison me *cough* with my own poison? *cough* Unfortunately for you, this *cough* isn't enough to *cough* kill me." "How about this?" Both of us said in unison. I charged up my laser beam and Tiracha pulled a weird-looking gun out of her pocket. Tiracha pointed at a point to the left of his chest and I understood. We aimed our weapons and fired at his heart. He let out a horrifying scream and green blood trickled from his chest. "You... cannot... *cough* win! Lord Armahita... I HAVE FAAAAAIIIIILED YOOOOOOUUUUUUUUUUUUUU-" Before he could finish his sentence, he imploded into a bright ball of fire before slowly disintegrating, with nothing left there. We looked around for the orb and realised that it was a trap.

A hatch opened in the wall and fired a huge metal ball right at us. We dodged just in time and the ball crashed into the wall, creating a huge hole in the wall that revealed a passage leading to a branching corridor. Another hatch opened in the ceiling and a poisonous gas was released. Those of us who were still alive ran into the corridor. Great, TWO situations in which we had to run from something that was about to kill us on the same day. Though the corridor appeared branched, there was only one passage that wasn't blocked off, so we ran and found a huge elevator that went to the surface. We stepped in and heaved a collective sigh of relief.

When we emerged, we found ourselves not on Planet Entia, but in a large field in the middle of nowhere with some withered trees scattered across the grass, and in front of a closed door leading to nothing. Something was engraved on the door, in English. It read:

“As the armies faces the betrayal of their own,
The fire-bearer treads through time alone.”

I was able to push the door open effortlessly. Inside, I saw a jungle with tall trees and abundant wildlife. Well, that’s what I saw. Everyone else seemed puzzled as if the door just led to nothing as it initially seemed. I walked through it and was transported to the jungle. After walking around for a bit, I realised some of the trees here were in the same place as they were back in the field. This was the same place, but in the distant past.

I looked down and found a path that someone else had created here. I followed it for a while and on my way, I found a white horse. It ran to my side and I thought of fleeing for a moment, but it stopped by my side and nuzzled my shoulder with its head. I patted its head and tried climbing its back. As soon as I got on, it galloped ahead at full speed. I was grateful for a companion in this otherwise lonely journey. We galloped through the forest together, watching the snakes slither and the deer graze.

When we reached a large and empty field, the horse stopped and whinnied. I got off, patted its head once more and walked into the field alone. For some reason, the horse was scared of this place. I looked around and noticed that the field was circular. In fact, it was a perfect circle, which could only mean one thing... This was a battle arena.

CHAPTER 2

Bleeding Whips

I was about to pull my laser out, but a sword and shield fell from the sky and landed at my feet. I picked them up and examined them. The sword was a long and sharp iron sword with a ruby on the hilt. Somehow, its size and weight were perfect for me, as if it was meant for me to wield. The shield was made of bronze and had a gleaming letter “S” on the front. When I saw that, I knew these really were made for me.

Something materialised behind me. I looked around to see who my foe was but standing there was... Tiracha. I grinned and said, “Oh, it’s you! Come, fight with me!” She said, “I’m here to fight you. I knew your frail heart couldn’t handle this betrayal, so I trudged along with you till I got an opportunity to strike, and that opportunity is here.” No... this couldn’t be happening. I thought she was my friend. True, we had only known each other for about 1.5 days, but we had been through so much together, and here she was, ready to kill me. I also knew she was a better fighter than I was, which meant I was probably going to die.

I shook my head in disbelief, hoping she was just kidding. But then she charged at me with her sword and I realized she wasn’t kidding after all. I sidestepped just in time to avoid her charge and pierced her back. She groaned and blood trickled from the spot where I stabbed her. I felt really bad, but she got right back up and almost caught me off guard with a lightning-fast sword swing. It grazed my left arm, but I had to keep fighting because the entrance had magically disappeared and I was trapped here till one of us died.

We whittled away at each other. I used my fire and laser beam so I could at least stand a chance, but surprisingly, Tiracha was more heavily wounded. Every time I saw one of those bruises, I felt guilty and uncomfortable. I wanted to leave and go on with my usual boring school life. But alas, I was stuck here and there was nothing I could do. Whether I won or lost, my heart would be shattered beyond repair.

After trading blows for what felt like forever, both of us were wounded and exhausted, but Tiracha just kept going. All the wounds I gave her could only slow her down, she couldn't be stopped while she was alive. I knew I couldn't stall forever. I was tired and hurt. I had to kill or be killed. After some hesitation, I prepared to deliver the final blow. I had a plan in mind, but I had to use it at just the right time. After a minute of dodging and saving my energy for the final blow, she was in place. I summoned fire to my palm and gave her a blazing slap in the face, then used my laser to break her shield while she was exhausted, and then it was time for the final blow. I shut my eyes in an attempt to hide my tears and stabbed her in the chest. She collapsed, soaked in blood. I dropped to my knees and started to weep, when I saw her body disintegrate into golden dust. A voice from the sky said, "That was not your friend. She is still alive, on the battlefield, fighting her own battle with the kings and the armies. This was a test from the gods to see if you were worthy of wielding our ancient power." I shook my fist at the sky and screamed amidst my tears, "Curse you! You made me think I was betraying a friend and almost killed me just to see if I was "worthy"? I never asked for all this! I just want to get this orb back and... go home." The voice sighed, "Very well, then. You will be taken back to the battlefield. One of the soldiers in the Entiad army was overcome by greed and betrayed the army to take the orb's power for himself.

Somehow, he now possesses complete control of water, a power thought to be lost in the ocean millennia ago. They need your help. Go. Once the battle is over, go north if you still seek the orb's full power." I felt a similar sensation to the one I felt when using the teleporters in Cloudia, and soon I was back on the battlefield, now partially flooded.

I was relieved to see Tiracha alive and fighting. It felt like a huge weight was lifted off my chest. She looked at my wounds and teary eyes and asked, "What were you up to?" "Fighting you. Long story," I replied. She looked at me suspiciously, then nodded and said, "Give us a hand here if you can." "Hang on. Need to heal first," I replied. Before I could go inside to get a medical kit, she grabbed my wrist and held it tightly for a few seconds. The wounds and scars on my body slowly healed and I was perfectly fine again. "We can't afford to lose any time here," she said. I nodded and charged into battle.

I could immediately see the damage. I was knee-deep in water and had to wade through floating corpses until I reached the ocean man himself, now trying to choke some soldiers with water. "Hey, water man," I shouted, "Time to dry you off!" I shot a burst of heat his way and evaporated the water in his hand, releasing the soldiers and turning his wrath towards me. "You wretched brat! Had to interfere, didn't you? Well, you won't be interfering anymore," he said and summoned a wave. I summoned fire to both my hands and interlocked them, creating a force field around me, something I learnt to do during my battle against fake Tiracha. The wave died down when it hit my force field, but the force field was weakened. It took all my energy to get it back to full power. "What were the gods playing at giving a skinny jerk like you the power of fire?" He shouted, to which I replied, "What were they playing at giving you control

over water? They're just like that, I suppose." This made him furious and he sent another huge wave my way. The wave broke through my force field, but it also exhausted him. I seized the opportunity and shot my laser beam at his face. I kept it going as I edged closer to him, then released it. I took a moment to laugh at his burnt face, then stabbed his chest with my sword, but apparently, he had a force field too. My sword alone couldn't penetrate his skin and the laser couldn't kill him. He lashed at me and I ducked just in time to avoid his swing, then tempered the tip of my sword with fire and stabbed him while it was still hot. It successfully penetrated the force field. "ARMAHITAAAAAAAAAAAA!" He screamed as the life drained out of him. Despite his best efforts to not die, he died, but not before he unleashed one final, colossal wave. I tried to get my force field up again, but I didn't need to. Tiracha showed up just as the wave was about to hit and somehow made it disperse with a shot of the same gun she used when we were fighting the beast. "Now we just need to drain this water," she said. She pressed a button on her gun and it turned into a vacuum device that sucked all the water in. "How-" I had learnt not to question this stuff. "Picked it up at the lab," she said. "Proved to be pretty handy."

After mourning for a while, the kings and armies said they couldn't come with us any longer, so they teleported back to their respective planets and sky cities and we continued our search for the binding force of the orb. We went north as the heavenly voice suggested and reached the outskirts of Bingwen City. The only way I could describe it is a futuristic city, but more silent and introverted. There were many people on the streets, but they barely interacted. It felt calm and peaceful after the intense battles we had just endured.

We bought some supplies from the conveniently placed Botha's Firearms and continued our journey northward. I would love to say we trekked through hills and fought off monsters, but we just took another flying limo. Sharhak had given us passes to take any form of transport we wanted on Entia. We flew over the city in silence for a while, but then Tiracha broke the silence.

"When you arrived here all bruised and teary-eyed, you said you had fought me. What did you mean?"

"Apparently the gods wanted to test me and see if I was worthy of wielding their power."

"And?"

"Their test was me fighting a clone of you."

"And?"

"I... killed you."

"And?"

"What do you mean?"

"How did you react?"

"I-"

"Did you cry?"

"Maybe..."

"And scream at the gods?"

"Possibly..."

"Hm. So you do like me."

"I didn't say that!"

"You implied it."

"Oh, for god's sake-"

Our lovely conversation was interrupted by a loud bang from below us. We looked down at the city just in time for our limo to get hit by a cannonball, sending us plummeting to the ground. We looked around and realised that Bingwen City was under

attack. The head of the operation was a guy named Mr. Whip. He looked down at us from his gunship and said, "Oh, look. The fire guy and the healing girl are here. Unfortunately, this gunship is fireproof. I hope you've said your goodbyes because something's going to kill you right about... now." He fired a cannonball at us. We dodged it right on time and I shouted at him, "We've escaped burning sewers and fought a monster ten times your size today. You're no threat to us!" We dodged another cannonball and I fired my laser at his gunship. "Hey, wait a minute! That's my laser blaster! Where did you get it from?" "Oh, found it lying around in an underground lab," I replied casually. Then he glanced at the MAGS INDUSTRIES device on my waist and exclaimed, "WHAT? You have a Mags Industries Heavy-Duty 1575-Kiloreson Super Bullet Shield 7.8 Deluxe Pro Max Edition? How dare you use my own equipment against me-" His cry of agony was interrupted by a loud bang coming from his gunship. I had destroyed his cannon with a well-placed laser beam while he was distracted. "You have just made the wrong enemy, Siddharth! *spits* What kind of name is that?" "Well, it's better than Whip." "I- I WILL COME BACK TO KILL YOU! MARK MY WORDS-" I interrupted his rant with a burnt cheek. He got the message. The gunship turned and flew into the horizon.

Since we couldn't use the limo anymore, we flew Sharhak's private jet to Mount Vilino, our next destination in the orb hunt. It was the highest peak on Planet Entia, with a snow-covered peak and scarce alpine vegetation. "Hey, you did pretty well back there," Tiracha told me. "I don't think I'm doing well enough. If I don't find the orb by the end of tomorrow, I'll worry the people who care for me the most, and that's depressing to even think about." "Don't worry. You can do this," Tiracha said. It was good to know that at least one person believed in me.

I could increase my body's temperature to survive the cold, but Tiracha had no such power. I asked her about how she would survive the cold, but she just shrugged me off and said, "I will. Don't worry about it." We got off at the peak and Tiracha seemed unaffected by the cold. I asked her how and she said, "While we were shopping at Botha's Firearms, I picked up a Mags Industries Premium Sub-Zero Insulator Pro Version 3.14159265-" "OK, I get it," I told her, "It's nearly 10 PM. I only have a day left." At the summit, we found a shaft with an elevator going down into it. We got in and reached a large capsule with a device in it bounded by chains. The capsule had the words "ENERGY ORB POWER TRANSMISSION SHELL" written on it. Part of the front was broken off, allowing us to simply grab the shell. "This seems too good to be true. It's just lying there?" I asked nobody in particular. Then I heard Mr. Whip's voice booming from nowhere, "Yes, retrieving the shell is that easy. Unfortunately, getting out of here isn't." I looked behind me and the elevator was gone. Mr. Whip laughed and said, "Nap time."

Six hatches, similar to the ones we saw when fighting the poison nail beast, opened and released an orange gas. I tried to hold my breath, but I couldn't hold it forever, and me and Tiracha eventually inhaled the gas and passed out.

The next thing I knew, I was awake again, in the same chamber. "Oh, hello. Did you have a good nap? You've been asleep for... ah, 25 hours and 57 minutes. Three minutes to midnight on the next day. What a nice coincidence, since I'm about to release a toxin that will kill you, and it's going to be released in three minutes! I'll come back three minutes later to

collect your dead bodies and serve them to Lord Armahita. Goodbye!”

I panicked. “I have to keep my promise, I have to get back home in three minutes,” I whispered to Tiracha. “We’ll find a way out,” Tiracha replied. She pulled her gun out and pointed it at the walls and floor. At first it didn’t do anything, but when she pointed it at a specific part of the floor, it beeped. She shot there and a passage opened. “Secret escape shaft,” she said. She hung the orb on her belt and jumped in. I had many questions, but my priority was to get out. I jumped into the hole, which wasn’t very deep, and Tiracha shot through the hole, somehow sealing it. We ran through a corridor for a while, but I knew it was hopeless. Then, I heard a bell toll. A female voice said, “Keep your promise.” A teleporter appeared in front of me. Tiracha looked at me and said, “I’ll take the shell. Go home.” “Are you sure you don’t need my help?” “I’ll figure it out. Your family needs you. Go.” “But-”

Before I could say anything, Tiracha pulled a USB drive out of her pocket.

“Plug this into your computer back on Earth. It’ll let you create a shadow of yourself on this planet and control it from your computer like a video game.”

“But what about my novel?”

“What?”

“I’m writing a novel about my adventures here. I can’t write it if I can’t experience it through my own body. Who’ll finish that then?”

“How about both of us?”

I was about to ask what she meant, but she pushed me onto the teleporter and said, “See you later.” I tried to say

something, but my surroundings had already dissolved and soon, I was... back home.

To be continued in... THE FIRES OF ENTIA: EPISODE THREE!

Decode this (Base64):

**aHR0cHM6Ly9kb2NzLmdvb2dsZS5jb20vZG9jdW1lbnQvZC8xT09Ue
mo0ejlKZkJCCe1TUHNmVDg1dURBRE9fVUw0dmlvZWRpdD91c3A9
c2hhcmLuZyZvdWlkPTEwNDgzNDgxMTk0NDgwNDk2MDgyMiZydH
BvZj10cnVlJnNkPXRydWU=**