

THE FIRES OF ENTIA

EPISODE ONE

BY SIDDHARTH JAI GOKULAN

CHAPTER 1

Above the Clouds

I was in bed, dreaming I was in space, going to an unknown planet. I was woken up with a notification on my phone showing me a distress signal coming from an unidentified planet. Saying this was quite unusual would be an understatement, so of course I did what any insane being would do. I decided to track it down. I was taking my exams online due to the COVID-19 virus anyway, so I went into the backyard for some reason and found a dome-shaped cable-car spaceship just lying there, equipped with a computer. Why did it look like a cable car? How did it end up there? As I went on, I learnt to just not ask those questions, because I knew I wouldn't get answers. I was skeptical for a moment, but it seemed safe enough and I hopped in. The computer helped me pinpoint the origin of the signal and I started following it. The computer screen read "Approaching rock mass LMS09: Planet Entia - Survivability: 100%; Signs of life detected at coordinates 1500, 255." I found this promising, so I thrust the ship forward at full speed. As we got closer, I got my first glimpse of the planet. It looked like a spherical desert - hot, dry and with not much life on it. I started descent and soon found myself on the surface of Planet Entia.

The first thing I noticed was that my landing site may have been the ruins of a once-great civilization, now reduced to a seemingly endless desert. The fallen pillars and tattered brick houses had inscriptions carved on them in a language I had never seen, mostly consisting of what seemed to be polygons with patterns inside them. In front of me was a lopsided sign with more of those symbols. I sent a picture of the sign to the ship's computer to see if it could find any similar images on the internet, but I didn't get any results. I was seemingly at the location of the signal, but there were no signs of life here. Then, in the corner of my eye, I saw a strange structure.

It was a dome made of steel, painted in a dark-blue matte finish. In contrast to the rest of the place, this dome looked new and futuristic. Curiosity got the better of me and I entered the dome. Inside, I found an elevator with glass doors. I thought the distress signal may have come from underground and this elevator might take me there. But the elevator had no 'down' button. It only went up. How could it go up when the dome had only one floor? I stepped inside and got my answer. A hatch opened in the ceiling of the dome and the elevator shot into the sky.

Soon, I found myself, well, in the sky. On a floating island in the sky, to be precise. As I looked around, I found out that it was a group of islands, a city. On the central island stood a huge marble palace. I figured I should try to get there, but I didn't know how. Then, I noticed a levitating platform in front of me. I decided to step on it. Then, the world around me seemed to dissolve and disintegrate into space. My stomach felt hollow as I drifted through space. After a few seconds, I was back in the real world (well, as real as sky islands can be), but I was on a different platform, in front of the palace. I had just... teleported.

I stepped inside the palace and was greeted by a red carpet and a long, branching corridor. I went straight and reached the throne room. On the golden throne sat a seemingly human king decked in silver armour, holding a spear in his left hand. Except... he had large brown wings and his head seemed to be part of his armour, made of silver like the rest. He stood up and walked towards me. He held his hand out, willing me to shake it. I assumed this was simply a positive gesture and shook it, but when I did, I felt my nerves tingle as if a wave of electricity just went through my hand, to my brain. Then he spoke, and I realized what had happened. He had wordlessly taught me his language, like he had installed a translation app in my brain.

He told me about his race - how they used to live on the planet's surface, how a great war ensued and they were forced to retreat, finding a new home in the sky.

"We were outnumbered by Sharhak's army and forced to retreat. Those of us who were still alive fled to the Dome of Isolation and found a ride to the sky. We had no other choice, so we took some essential supplies and our most precious possessions and stepped in. To our surprise, we found a group of floating islands there, connected by bridges. They were empty and uninhabited, so we decided to make them our new home. As time passed, we created a technologically advanced civilization in the sky. We replaced the bridges with teleporters and built the Great Palace of the Sky, creating the Cloudia you see today."

Sharhak... that name sounded familiar for some reason. I remembered reading about him, a war between his army and the Entiads. Suddenly, something clicked in my head. "So... you're the Entiads?" I asked. The king slowly nodded.

The Entiads, also known as the Hollowheads. They're basically humanoid beings with hollow faces. I remembered what had happened in the war. Sharhak and his army won the war and claimed Planet Entia for their race, forcing the Entiads to build and inhabit Cludia, the islands above the clouds.

"Head to the second island to the east of the palace. You will see why when you get there," the king said. I followed the order without asking any questions. For some reason, I trusted the king, but I didn't know why. At first, the island seemed pretty barren and uninteresting, but then I saw that at the other side, there was another teleporter. I stepped on it and drifted through space as usual, but this time I didn't land on another island. I landed... at the foot of a volcano.

Upon further inspection, I found that the lava had cooled down and I couldn't see any magma at the top. I assumed I had to get to the top, so I started hiking up the volcano. The sky was blood red and the atmosphere felt hotter and more impure here than on Entia's landing site. I soon reached the top and found an elevator going down... into the volcano.

I took a deep breath and stepped inside. The ride was shorter than I expected. Maybe I wasn't at the bottom of the volcano? Whatever the case, I stepped out and looked around. This place was probably natural, but it felt artificial for some reason, as if someone was here before and they set it up as a technological hub of sorts. Where was this place anyway? Was it on Planet Entia? Was it another huge island of Cludia?

In front of me, on a steel lectern, were some Entian inscriptions and a handprint. I placed my hand on the handprint and the inscriptions lit up and blazed. I felt my body growing hotter, and my nerves tingling just as they had when the Entiad King taught me the Entian language. After a few seconds, the inscriptions returned to normal and my body cooled down again, but I felt fire coursing through my veins. I concentrated my mind on the fire and felt my hand heating up until... it was on fire, except... I wasn't hurt by it. I was now immune to fire, and I could summon it at will. "Oh, *this* is gonna be fun to play around with!" I thought, with a grin on my face.

My glee was cut short, however, by a tremor in the volcano. The lava started rising, and a female robotic voice boomed through the volcano: "60 seconds to

eruption." I silently admired whoever installed a speaker system and eruption alarm inside a volcano.

I thought the elevator was pretty fast during my descent, but now it felt agonizingly slow as the voice kept reminding me how much time remained.
"50 seconds to eruption."

I started getting somewhat anxious.

"40 seconds to eruption."

I needed to pee.

"30 seconds to eruption."

The elevator finally reached the top and I ran down the volcano as fast as I could.

"20 seconds to eruption."

I just realized how large this volcano really was.

"10 seconds to eruption."

Almost there...

"5. 4. 3. 2. 1."

I made it to the teleporter at the last second, and heard a loud explosion as I drifted into space once again. How did these teleporters work anyway? Was I in some kind of alternate dimension? I would probably never find out.

I was back in Cludia, so I went to the palace and asked the king why he sent me there.

"When I transferred knowledge of our language to your mind, I also collected information on who you are and why you came here, and I thought you might be the next one to absorb the power of fire, after a century of it lying dormant. I was unsure, but I decided it would be worth a shot. I sense fire coursing through your body, so I believe I was right," he said.

So that's why he didn't ask me who I was or why I was here, he pulled that information from my mind just as he poured his language into mine. I have to admit that was a pretty clever trick.

He then gave me my objective, the reason the distress signal was sent. "Somewhere on the surface of Entia, there's a long, twisting maze, at the center of which there is a glowing blue orb. This orb was the source of our power, but it has been kept in this maze, significantly reducing its power. Thanks to this orb, we were once masters of sorcery, but now its power has been limited thanks to its containment in the maze. The reason we sent the distress signal and the ship was because we needed someone to retrieve it

from the maze, someone who could wield the ancient power of fire. And now, you are here. Help us. Retrieve the orb. Is your objective clear?"

I nodded.

He took me to a room of the palace that was seemingly empty. He tapped a certain brick on the wall and walked right through it. I followed. Inside, there was a secret teleporter. The king gestured towards it, so I stepped on it and teleported as usual, landing back on the surface of the planet.

I was still in a barren desert-like area, though this place seemed emptier and more... deserted. I looked around for a sign of a maze, but found nothing. Then, on the ground, I found a stone tablet with an Entian inscription on it. Now that I knew the Entian language, I could read it, and it said:

"When the three torches blaze,
The way opens to the fiery maze.
Face the trial of the lab that once ran fine,
And the orb shall be thine."

As evil as this person was, at least they knew how to mix poetry and old English, or rather, Entian. Wait a minute, how did the words even rhyme in English? Why did Entian have a separate word meaning "thine"? And what did they mean by "once ran fine"? Was it no longer operational?

So I had to light three torches. Sounded simple enough. But there were no torches in sight. I looked around and eventually found three torches in a row, pretty far apart from each other. I lit one, but it extinguished itself less than a second after I took my hand off. The same happened with the other two torches. I was puzzled. How would I light all three of these if one went out by the time I lit the next one? I started swinging my arm around like I usually did when thinking, but one of those swings happened to line up with the row of torches, lighting all three of them before any of them could go out. I had accidentally solved the puzzle! I went back to the stone tablet and found that it had moved aside, with an elevator in its original place. I stepped in and descended a normal elevator shaft at first, but as I went lower, it got darker and darker until it was pitch black for a few seconds. Then I saw some light again, coming from some fires. The glass doors opened and I realized I had arrived at my destination.

At first, it didn't seem like much of a maze, just a straight corridor surrounded by fire. I walked down the corridor and eventually reached a large square room that branched off into three paths. At the center of the room was a large

golden statue with three grey eyes on it. I didn't understand what it represented, so I took the left path and moved on.

CHAPTER 2

The Withering Maze

I was in a maze, but it didn't seem like one. There were many ways to go and many dead ends, but it felt... natural and alive. And not in the "designed to look natural" kinda way. Grass teemed from every corner and I would see the occasional rabbit or deer. And strangest of all, there was no fire to be seen.

As I went deeper, the grass started looking dry, the wildlife was scarce and I was always surrounded by mist. It was like something was holding the forest back. In the middle of a thick forest-like area, I found a seemingly normal human like me. She was coated with scars and wounds all over her body as if she'd just fought a war. Despite looking like she was in a really bad condition, her eyes had a fierce gleam. She sized me up and asked, "So... you're the guy with the power of fire, huh? Didn't think a guy like you would be the one to receive it but I'll take what I can get at this point." She stood up, then closed her eyes, clenched her fists and concentrated on something. Then, suddenly, the wounds on her body started fading and she looked perfectly fine again. "What're you staring at? Don't tell me you don't know about healing spells!" she said. "You really don't, huh? Well, we'll get to that when we need to. For now... let's explore this place together," she said, and her eyes had a disobey-me-and-I'll-roast-you-in-your-own-fire look. I decided to just let her come along, because she was probably a better fighter than I would ever be and that look was terrifying.

After walking in awkward silence for a while, I asked her why she was bruised and scarred when I met her. "Fighting, of course," she said. I thought of asking what she was fighting but I decided to leave it at that. I asked her what her name was. She hesitated a little, then replied "It's Tiracha. Why?" I said I was just curious.

Soon we reached a part of the maze that looked withered and forsaken, except for one flower. The trees had withered, the water had dried up and the soil was hard and cracked, yet this one light-blue flower thrived against all odds. Tiracha bent down and touched it, and the ground started rumbling beneath us. Suddenly, the ground started sinking. It just went lower and lower like an elevator going down. Eventually, it came to a halt in an area that seemed like a forest, but withered like the area we came from. It seemed like an endless forsaken landscape with mist everywhere.

"The mist here is meant to lead you astray, away from the main path, and send you back to the place where you entered, basically leaving you lost forever until you find and follow the correct path. People who are lost for long enough have their mind taken over by the mist, clouding their thoughts and making them wander as lost souls until they meet their demise," Tiracha explained. I started walking at a pretty slow pace, constantly looking around to see if the place I was in seemed familiar.

And it was then that I remembered a promise I had made. I suddenly remembered my parents and my promise to be back within three days. I remembered my English teacher who was going to teach us about figures of speech in 3 days. I loved those lessons! Great, now I had a time limit to stress me out while navigating a huge and dangerous maze.

After navigating in eerie silence and mist for a while, I reached what seemed like the entrance to a mansion. Or at least, it used to be a mansion. Now the walls were overgrown with moss and the floors had gathered dust. I entered and found a large, open room with staircases and murals of what I assumed was Sharhak.

I didn't even know where to begin. Then I saw a sign that looked to have been installed recently, telling me to go right. I went left.

After climbing stairs for longer than anyone should climb stairs, I reached a door and went through it. And I saw... an aerial bridge. I decided not to look down but looked down anyway and stifled a yelp. Tiracha noticed that and said "You don't believe in the laws of physics holding this bridge up? Besides, there's water below to cover our fall, if swimming is your thing. Probably isn't too clean though." I crossed the bridge and just as I reached the ledge on the other side, the cables holding the bridge up snapped. "So much for science," I muttered.

I just went forward, thinking I could somehow find a way back, though I would probably just be stuck here forever. If only I had a portal gun...

At the end of a corridor, I found what seemed like a well, but the inside was a pitch-black bottomless pit. "Hello? Anything in there looking for humans to murder or something?" Tiracha shouted into the pit. I looked at the adjacent wall. There was a strange logo on it. Then something hit me. I smiled and went over to the pit. In the best murderous AI voice I could muster, I said into the pit: "The Enrichment Center requires that you and everyone else in your

organization stops existing. We apologize for the inconvenience. Please stop existing immediately.” Nothing happened. Then, suddenly, an enormous black hand appeared from the bottom of the pit and pulled me and Tiracha in. Then it let go, letting us fall to our death... by making us fall till we die.

Luckily for me, there’s this funny thing about bottomless pits - they usually aren’t bottomless and just deep enough to kill you on impact with the floor. Strangely though, our fall didn’t hurt a bit. We were standing in a white gel-like substance. We got out effortlessly without getting any gel in our shoes and found ourselves in... a laboratory. No, I’m serious, it seemed like a typical science lab with desks and equipment, but much larger. Upon closer inspection, I realized the equipment was not what you would expect from a science lab. In fact, it seemed like a bunch of random objects thrown in random places. A DIY trampoline, guns, kitchen cutlery, mechanical hands and a key card. I picked up the key card and read the name on it. Then I read the name again. Then again. Finally, I confirmed that it did indeed say “Tiracha Lakhnowingschi” on the front. I handed it to Tiracha and her expression immediately turned dull. “I’ll hold on to this,” she said without any explanation as to what it was, why it was here or why her last name was Lakhnowingschi. “Find some armour and weapons. There’s some... unfinished business here,” she told me. I picked up a set of dark-blue iron armour (Was it iron? I’m not sure.) and looked for an ideal weapon, when I found... a rifle. This was no ordinary rifle, though. I pointed it at a wall and pressed the trigger and found out... that it was a huge red laser beam. And a powerful one at that, leaving a huge smoking dent in the wall. Tiracha looked back in her new purple cold-resistant suit and her jaw dropped. “How- how did you do that?” I told her I just pressed the trigger. She examined the rifle for a few seconds, then muttered something about brains and went to find her own weapon. She returned with a sword and shield that seemed to suit her perfectly.

As we explored the lab, we found “failed experiments” that all looked like tortured human corpses. “So what’s the deal with this place?” I asked Tiracha. “Why would you ask me that?”

“Maybe because your name’s written on the key card?”

“That’s- Fine... I used to work here. When I say work, I mean perform experiments on people nearing death and willing to commit the rest of their life to science. We always learnt new things from the experiments and created things you take for granted nowadays like memes. Yes, we created memes. Long story.”

“How old are you anyway?”

“14.”

“And when did you stop working here?”

“On my 14th birthday.”

“Isn’t there, like, a law that says you have to go to school till 14?”

“Oh, I did go to school. There’s a school right here.”

“How did you even get down here?”

“Elevator.”

“Elevators go this far down?”

“We should know. We invented elevators.”

I left the conversation there.

We soon found a door that said “TOP SECRET”, so we knew we were going the right way. There was just one problem. The entrance was blocked by a locked wooden door with no key slot or handle. Even Tiracha’s key card did nothing. What do you do when you’re faced with an obstacle that you just can’t get past? Burn it down, of course. “I’ve got this,” I told her, and with some concentration and a flick of my hand, I lit the door on fire. Then we watched as it slowly combusted and turned to a pile of ashes. After what felt like an eternity, we stepped inside.

We were met with a large room with monitors and cameras on the walls, a desk at the center with what I assumed was the lab’s mainframe on it. And connected to it was a weird attachment with a camera and gun at the front. And on the sides of the mainframe were some microphones and... a subwoofer system? I understand the microphones but why would anyone need a huge speaker system here? To play someone’s favourite song for them while they get blasted by a rifle? Then I heard a voice coming from the speaker and thought “Oh, of course, the mainframe is managed by an AI.” I also recognized the voice. It was the voice that gave me those “helpful reminders” back at the volcano.

The camera looked around the room, then set its focus on me and Tiracha. “Target recognized. Greetings, heartbreaker,” the speaker said. For a moment I thought “Heartbreaker? When have I ever broken someone’s heart? How does this thing even know who I am?” Then I realized it was talking about Tiracha. Not everything in the world was about me, which was honestly a little... heartbreaking.

Then it examined me and said “Target not recognized. Intruder detected. Starting extermination in 1.” Without thinking, I quickly sidestepped and fired a

laser at the camera. It made a static noise for a second, then said “Visual functionality impaired. Cannot find targets. Activating intruder incineration mechanism. Seven minutes to complete room heating by molten lava and code transfer to room 1308.” The entrance somehow locked behind us, and I realized I should’ve made a coffin out of that wood I burnt.

I tried firing lasers everywhere but all it did was make Tiracha cover her ears and scream at me. Tiracha tried to stop the heating from the mainframe, but the room controls were locked behind a 5-layer security mechanism that would be impossible to guess or hack. In a last attempt at survival, I burnt down the pipes, attachments and anything that could burn me alive with a combination of my laser beam and fire hands, while Tiracha hacked away at all the cables connected to the mainframe. Then I thought “Oh, wait, I’m immune to heat and fire now. But what about her?” After a minute of pipe-breaking and cable-cutting, the timer on the mainframe glitched and became a garbled mess of symbols, changing several times a second. The voice said “Lava flow halted. Activating chamber self-destruct mechanism in 4 minutes 52 seconds. Deploying escape pod. Run while you still can.” Then the timer on the mainframe appeared again and started counting down. We saw a hidden elevator open at the other end of the room, so we ran there as fast as we could (Tiracha running faster than I ever could) and pressed the “Up” button. Part of me wonders what would’ve happened if I pressed down, but I’d rather not find out. We made it out surprisingly fast and exactly 3 minutes and 45 seconds later, the ground shook as if an earthquake just occurred. Thankfully, no earthquakes occurred.

After going through some more boring corridors without really doing anything, which was probably a good thing since it was a break after that intense escape, we reached a large hub dome. What was it with this planet and domes? Unlike the rest of the lab, the metal walls here looked old and rusted and the doors looked worn out and covered with hardened paint. Every door was locked except for one, so I entered and immediately, the door shut and locked itself, and I was trapped again, though I had a feeling it wouldn’t be for long. And on an altar in front of us was a blue orb. It radiated energy like the sun, but without burning us up. Tiracha examined it and said “Nothing looks too suspicious. Is this really all there is to it?” I carefully took a few steps forward and picked up the orb. Nothing happened for a few seconds. Then the monitors turned on and I saw someone dressed like a king. Maybe he was a king. His face looked like a king’s face. And his grin looked like... an evil king’s grin. “Oh. Sharhak, I assume,” I said in a feeble voice. A deep voice boomed

"Very good, it seems you've learnt your Entian history after all. Wait, is that... Tiracha? Don't tell me you're on his side!"

I was taken aback. "WHAT?! You're on HIS side?" I asked, my voice a blend of shock and anger, mostly shock.

She looked hurt. With a hint of tears in her eyes, she said, "It's not what you think it is. He didn't attack the Entians and steal the orb because he was some evil conqueror, he did it because... this planet was our home before the Entians just decided to call it home, and that orb belonged to us in the first place. We were just trying to reclaim what was ours, not trying to destroy someone else's life."

Sharhak added, "Besides, they had Cloudia anyway. We couldn't inhabit it because we don't have wings or gliders. The sky was their domain before they came down here, but that age was lost to time... for them. When we returned to this planet after the catastrophe that took place hundreds of years prior, we found our planet inhabited by some dudes with no faces and brown wings. Imagine how we must've felt then, even having this planet's source of power stolen by them! We didn't ruin their lives, they just flew up to the clouds and continued their life. It was us who had to rebuild the planet, make it our home again. Now who's the villain, huh?"

He was right. Who was the villain here? I realized there was no villain, it was just two sides fighting for what they believed was theirs. "So what are you going to do now?" I asked. "Freeze me to death? Send an army after me? Tell Tiracha to betray and murder me when I've barely known her for a day? Teleport here and kill me personally?"

"I do not wish to kill you, or even harm you," he replied, "I just want to ask you for a favour. Somewhere on this planet, there is something preventing the orb from radiating its energy like it used to before, hence all the receptors you see around you to transmit its power across the planet from this one room. Find that thing and destroy it. That way, both Entia and Cloudia can share the orb's power and we can put an end to this conflict. But you and Tiracha cannot do it alone. There is a teleporter past the altar. Use it to go back to Cloudia, both of you. Tell the Entian king of our side of the story. We cannot put an end to this unless the two races unite, and you two will act as the catalysts of this reaction. Remember, the fate of two races and civilizations rests in your hand, and the boy has to get back home. Speaking of you, what is your name anyway? I can usually find what someone's name is with a glance, makes for a cool party trick. But with you... it's like there's something hiding it."

I smiled and said, "My name is Siddharth. Nice knowing you! Right, off to Cludia."

His jaw dropped. "Wait, I've heard that name before, are you-?"

Before he could finish his sentence, me and Tiracha stepped in the teleporter and dissolved into the teleportation-vortex-thing-I-don't-know-about.

We teleported to the palace and Tiracha was captivated by what she saw, much like I was when I first came here, which was... just this morning. It felt so familiar and homely that I didn't even think twice after the first few minutes. Only now did I stop and take it all in. After about a minute of doing this, we got back to business and entered the palace. Upon reaching the throne room, the king asked, "Who is this? And where is the orb?" Tiracha got her handshake Entian lesson and we told the king about what Sharhak told us and that the two sides needed to unite.

He didn't seem to believe us, but he made a proposal. "Tomorrow, we go down to Entia's surface. We march to Sharhak's palace and see if you are telling the truth. If not, this girl who is accompanying you will be sent to fetch the orb with me at her side personally, and I will ensure neither she nor anything else we encounter there can kill me. Entians cannot enter the chamber with the orb in it, a force field is in place preventing us from doing so. And as for you, you will be sent back to where you came from before you landed here. But for now, I believe you. To your left upon leaving the throne room, you will find chambers to rest in. Tomorrow, you and this girl will lead the procession as we march towards Sharhak's palace. We are counting on you two, do not let us down."

We nodded and went to the "rest chamber" the king told us about. It was spacious, luxurious and comfortable, pretty much what you'd expect from a king's palace. We immediately hit the bed and dozed off.

The next day, we woke up ready for battle. We kept our weapons from the lab and joined the procession of Entiads. And there were a LOT of Entiads. 300? 500? Probably ten times that. We stepped onto a huge teleporter, just barely big enough to fit everyone in, and landed on the surface of Planet Entia, right in front of Sharhak's palace.

To be continued in...

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