

The Duel That Spanned the Ages Episode 1 Plot Recap

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Dear reader,

most likely you have received this document in conjunction with the Interactive Fiction work *Fang Vs. Claw*. *Fang Vs. Claw* is the second work in a series and continues the plot right where the first installment left off, thus the plot of *Fang Vs. Claw* won't make a lot of sense to you if you haven't played *The Duel That Spanned the Ages Episode 1*. So playing the games in sequence is highly recommended.

However, should you be under time constraints (for example because you need to judge some more IntroComp games) or just need a quick plot recap, do read on.

The majority of the text in this document is lifted directly from a transcript of Episode 1. Thus the text is more of a collection of the most important cutscenes rather than a proper work of static fiction. Please forgive me the resulting usage of the second person through most of the story.

I have tried not to spoil any puzzles. Should you decide to play *Episode 1* after reading this, there are still more than two hours of puzzle-solving gameplay to be had.

1 Above Geryon 5, ages after the fusion

They say the birth or death of a star is an important event; a spectacular show. Then something like the space battle that rages above Geryon 5 must certainly be less than a side note in galactic history; the plasma explosions less than a single spark in an eternal New Year's Eve. In stellar dimensions, it must be like ants fighting over a crumb of bread.

But to him, it is all that's important, his whole world. Well, not really, because Geryon 5 is theirs. All around him, the Machines' fleet and orbital stations are blasting away at his tree ships, burning the mighty trunks like firewood. His people are dying for him and his plan, and he cries for every single one of them on his way down.

His frozen tears leave a trace on his way through the orbital defence fire. The whole battle is just a distraction. He knew their tree ships did not have a chance to break the planet's defences, but the attack has kept them occupied enough for him to slip through. He is now approaching the final veil, a network of death ray satellites, and prepares for his inevitable death.

He knows the time has come when all of a sudden his skin begins to burn, his eyes turn to dust and his blood starts to boil. He is almost thankful as he finally dies, transformed into a lifeless bag of blood and bones, plummeting towards the metallic surface below. In his last moment he wonders if his people know they are godless now.

The spark of life returns to him out of nowhere. He is not to be stopped by something as pedestrian as death. Convulsing and shaking, he pulls himself together, in the literal sense. His body evolves again from a shapeless blob of liquid to more and more complex life forms. He has been human once, thus he grows arms and legs again. A cold wind is blowing around his body. He knows then that he needs to fly, and so he stretches and sprouts wings. A slim, seven-winged figure, he is the first living being to soar through this lifeless sky since the Machines overran the planet ages ago.

He circles for a few minutes to regain his direction. The digital song is extremely loud here, a cacophony of logic gates and radio communication. He compares it to standing in the middle of an orchestra and trying to pinpoint the single loudest instrument. Thankfully there is also a visual clue, a pattern in the arrangement of buildings below him. He heads for the huge octagonal tower sitting in the middle of the web of buildings, spider-like and droning, full of angles.

A few insect-like maintenance bots scurry away as he lands next to a ventilation shaft near the tower's top. It is barred of course, but he can adapt as needed, and a blob of acid from his stomach easily solves this small problem. He dives into the network of shafts below, making short work of all obstacles while listening

to the digital song for directions.

In the very centre of things, tucked away behind mountains of humming computers stands an ancient desk, grotesquely out of place on this world without people. There must have been chairs, coffee cups and other signs of human presence around here once, but they have withered away a long time ago. Still, the ancient desk is there, and on it an equally ancient workstation, complete with screen and keyboard, all in perfect repair. The first node, the root of it all.

He presses a key. An anxious second later the screen flashes to life.

PLEASE LOGIN:

He allows himself a smile, cracks his knuckles and splits his fingers. Once, twice. 40 digits start hammering away.

Now let's see if we can end this once and for all...

He remembers utilities, passwords, back doors. He remembers his life. When did this war begin? No living being knows any more. Maybe this ancient machine still remembers. As for him, his story begins ages ago...

2 Grand Curve Bar, shortly before the fusion

You stretch on your barstool. It is one of those lazy nights in the middle of nowhere. Your squad mates have already left, but you've had better than average luck with the cards, so you still have a little cash left and nothing else to do than spend it.

You are Corporal Solomon Shepard of the Andarian Rifles, call sign "Wiseguy".

You have grown up on a pilgrim's world in the middle of the galactic outback. Despite your biblical name, you have hardly inherited any of your parents' faith, preferring smuggler runs and barroom brawls to tending hydro cultures or attending church services.

Your inborn knack for shooting finally brought you to the Andarian Rifles, a minor mercenary company. Business has been slow lately, that is why you are stationed on patrol duty on a newly settled asteroid on the very edge of charted space, even farther away from anything exciting than your home world was.

There is actually nothing grand inside the Grand Curve Bar (It is named so for the allegedly fantastic view out of the panorama window). Most of the furniture seems to be made by the same manufacturer that supplies all bars in the galaxy. What is special, however, is that the owner and most of the regulars are Madagakkur.

The evening is late, and you are the last patron in the bar. The only person left beside you is Khemgi, the barkeeper, who is standing behind the bar and preparing your next drink.

All around you, the fragrance of alien spices battles the antiseptic smell of a dozen times recycled air.

Just as you toss a few credits on the table and get up to leave, Khemgi comes over to the table and places an exotic fruit on it. "Please accept this as a present from the house, great warrior. It is very delicious and will give you strength." He smiles enthusiastically.

You have never seen such a fruit before. It is the size and shape of a peach, but its colour seems to change constantly, almost as if it was trying to camouflage itself.

The fruit tastes good, somewhere between sweet and hot, and it is kind of warm. You swallow, but it gets stuck in your throat, starts pulsating now, gets hotter. You swallow again, to no avail. You cough, trying to get it out but it is as if the fruit is transforming into some kind of cactus; it pricks your mouth and throat, expanding, getting hotter again, pulsating, stabbing into your head ...

3 East Aquila owned Shuttle, 8h after the fusion

With a sharp CRACK your communicator tears you out of your nightmare. "This is Austin 1. Prepare for landing. Hold fast everybody."

No more of this cheap booze... ever. Your memory of the last evening is blurry. Did something like what you've just dreamed happen? You'd rather guess it was some sort of bad trip. What you do know for sure is that you have a monster of a headache.

And, apparently, a mission. Otherwise you wouldn't be here. Sergeant Jenkins hasn't filled you in on the details yet, though.

You've known Dashman, Maxi and Diamond for a year now, and they've proved reliable so far. Their card playing skills are well developed; and that's probably the only thing that saved your sanity in this desolate place.

"This is Jenkins. All right soldiers, here's the briefing: Two hours ago, our employers lost contact to a team of prospectors. Our mission is to get them back or at least find out what happened to them. According to their last radio message, the prospectors wanted to inspect a field of rocks about five kilometres from Mount Argos.

"We've just passed over this rock field, but we couldn't see a sign of them.

However, they are using a smaller shuttle than what we've got here, so it is perfectly possible they've landed inside the rock field. This asteroid is so chock-full of rare metals that it drives our scanners mad, so we'll have to scour the area personally."

"We'll use your usual call signs. Our shuttle will use the call sign 'Austin 1'. There's not much our shuttle pilot can do for us, but we'll stay in radio contact so he can track our progress."

With a final jerk the shuttle comes to rest. The hatch swings open.

"Touchdown. Let's go."

You step again onto the barren surface of Asteroid 3095/4. Everything around you - the sand, the boulders, some distant mountains - is of a dull, lifeless grey. There's zero atmosphere in this place. The asteroid came from a dead region of the galaxy, and it is just that: dead.

"Wiseguy, you take point. The rest follows in diamond formation."

4 Surface of Asteroid 3095/4, 9h after the fusion

"Heads up - there are dead bodies here. Looks like our missing prospectors."

According to the badges on their shredded space suits, the corpses in front of you are the remains of the missing prospectors. The human body shows its frailty to the fullest when exposed to vacuum; with large chunks of their protective suits gone, the poor guys' bodies have swollen and burst. Just what did the tearing to the suits, you've got no idea. Most likely some sort of fragmentation grenade.

Some 20 metres further into the rock field you finally find what you've been looking for. The prospectors' shuttle lies here, half-buried in an avalanche of grey rocks.

"Jenkins here. There's no way this bird is gonna fly again. Wiseguy, see if you can extract the black box from the wreck. That should be enough to find out what happened here."

After forcing open the maintenance hatch, you ungently rip the black box from the shattered shuttles intestines.

"Huh? what theAAARRchhhh..."

You whirl around, still clutching the black box, just in time to watch Dashman slip from the spike that protrudes from his chest. Red ice crystals are settling on the ground before him. His visor is also coloured a solid red.

Dead people emerge from behind the collapsed body - walking amorphous scrap heaps. The metal shells are pulling the dead forward, heads lolling, frozen limbs breaking off... not the bodies seem to move, but the suits themselves...

Fired from somewhere to your left (Diamond?), burning plasma engulfs one of the attackers and reduces him/her/it to ashes.

The remaining living suits bulge, then spit a wave of shrapnel. Jenkins' armour is razed away from his now exploding body. The second wave hits you squarely at chest height.

You crash into a boulder with your back, topple over and land on something crumpled. The black box. It's completely shredded. It must have saved you. A stream of noise and shrieks pours out of your communicator.

It takes an eternity until you manage to pump enough air into your lungs to get up again. Your armour is whining something about pressure loss, but you ignore that for now. The radio traffic has finally died away to static.

5 Surface of Asteroid 3095/4, 9h 15m after the fusion

"This is Austin 1. What's going on? Anybody hear me?"

"Wiseguy here. They're dead. They're all dead." The words crawl out heavy as lead.

"This is Austin 1. Come back here ASAP. We need to... There's an unidentified flying object directly above the rock field! It matches no known profile... what is this? This can't be good. Retreat to my position. 037.128! Move!"

A dark shape circles above the rock field. It looks somewhat like an exotic hovercraft, except that a humanoid-shaped torso is mounted atop the main body. For lack of a better word, you call it the "centaur". You can see no markings on its exceptionally smooth hull. The centaur is wielding a large lance-like object.

You realize it is searching for survivors.

6 Surface of Asteroid 3095/4, 9h 30m after the fusion

"This is Austin 1! Jump in, quickly! I've been locked on! I need to take off now!"

You jump through the cargo hatch into the shuttle.

"Hold on to something!"

The transport shuttle jerks violently up and forward, so hard that you're almost thrown out of the hatch again. As you regain your footing, the rock field is already well below and behind you.

"That thing's shooting at us!"

You're tossed against the wall of the cargo hold as the transport performs a tight turn to evade a thin energy beam fired by the centaur.

"This is Austin 1! I can't break the lock! Do something! Occupy the bastard!"

You release the safety on your plasma rifle.

The centaur is aiming straight at you - no time for the targeting aids - you inhale - aim - fire - exhale. The centaur is knocked back by the impact. The lance still goes off, but only grazes the transport shuttle. You shift your position to the left of the hatch. Again - inhale - aim - fire - exhale - change position. A narrow beam of energy barely misses you, striking the fore wall of the cargo bay instead. The whole thing becomes a kind of dance - inhale - aim - fire - exhale - change position. Keep the centaur off balance...

You fire on until the plasma rifle becomes unbearably hot in your hands. Your left glove feels like it's melting. Then, finally, the centaur turns off and falls back.

Exhausted, you sink down on a bench.

"We did it," you say.

Silence.

"Do you copy?"

Silence.

The shuttle is descending fast. You jump on your feet again.

You wait until the last possible moment before jumping off. The ground zooms by at dazzling speed, but you've got no choice. You hit the ground on your

feet, then you are immediately pulled into a backward roll. The horizon spins around several times. You hit something, then all goes black.

7 Inner Sanctum, 10h after the fusion

"Are you certain he is the right one?"

"He is the closest match. They say he is the best marksman in the whole sector."

"How did he react to the implantation?"

"Reasonably well, I suppose. The elders say the warrior seed will kill an unworthy being; he has survived. I did not have the time for a long examination, though."

"Good. He must be on his way before the node has fully awoken from its hibernation. Time is of the essence."

8 Surface of Asteroid 3095/4, 10h 30m after the fusion

"Gen... Le... Vel... Criti... Cal... War... Ning... Oxy... Gen... Le... Vel... Criti... Cal."

You are sprawled on a bed of grey dust. The sky is black with a sea of stars idly shining down on you. A familiar female voice sings a lullaby. You've never noticed before that her voice was so... musical. She sings to you. "Warning. Oxygen level critical."

You stumble on your feet again.

There's hardly a landmark around here, except for a small crater a few paces next to you. Otherwise all you can see is dust until the horizon, which seems awfully close. You feel like you're on a marble, or rather a lump of clay.

You call up the map of this area. It presents a pretty bleak picture. The only interesting thing close enough for you to reach before your oxygen runs out is a restricted area a bit north from your position. Naturally, your map of the spot is blank. There's bound to be something interesting there, you just can't tell if it's a top secret installation or a nuclear accident site. You set a waypoint there anyway.

9 Mining Facility, Airlock, 11h after the fusion

The airlock door closes silently behind you. You hear a faint hiss fade in, building up to a sharp crescendo. Then again silence, albeit a short one, broken by the sound of hidden activators as the inner airlock door door retracts into the ceiling. You claw at your helmet's breathing unit and tear it open to let new, phenolic-smelling air into your lungs.

You collapse on the spot, celebrating that you're still among the living. On a less cheery note, your armour's electronics have just gone dead due to energy shortage. At least no more annoying warning messages, then.

10 Inner Sanctum, 11h after the fusion

"You have seen him?"

"Yes, Khemgi. He is making progress quicker than we thought. He already is right above the node's root."

"Above the control centre?"

"Yes, that is what you call it. But the fusion is far from complete; his body is still so very frail. They are hunting him. He must not be killed!"

11 Mining Facility, 13h after the fusion

With a soft sigh, the armour opens up at the front.

That's more like it. You've battled countless machines in this facility. You must be the only human alive on this godforsaken lump of rock. But now, for once, you've got the bigger guns and the stronger artificial muscle on your side.

This massive compound of ceramic, steel and artificial muscles is the new king of the battlefield. The Demolisher exo-armour might not have a tank's overland speed, but it is unmatched when it comes to rough close-quarters combat. This particular model stands about 3 metres tall and is outfitted with reinforced fists for smashing armoured targets.

Various locks and bolts snap into place as the armour embraces you. After the servo actuators have all powered up, your strength is increased tenfold. It feels no harder to move in the Demolisher than if you were naked. Just for kicks, you smack your gauntleted fists together. Nice sound.

12 Mining facility, 14h after the fusion

That's it. The Demolisher's massive fists have made short work of the hatch leading down and you prepare to descend into a lower level of the facility.

Through the smashed hatch, you can see a large room full of giant cubes. A centaur returns your look from down there, unmoving. Without hesitation, you jump down to engage it.

What is dead shall not move on its own accord. It shall be subjected to the laws of the 12th harmonic and the blow of the solar winds. It shall be home to all that lives and not taint other non-life with its doing...

These words simply appeared in your head. Whose... a fierce headache nips the thought in the bud.

It killed your people.

That one you understand. But whose...

IT KILLED YOUR PEOPLE.

You land on your feet. The enemy is right in front of you. Servos tighten. You are ready to pounce.

You both calculate your positions...

It is more difficult fighting non-living opponents. There is no scent, no pheromones to betray their intentions. They do have moving tissue, but it behaves different from the muscles and sinews of the seven-clawed prowlers you are used to. Don't expect them to coil up visibly before attacking...

You think of the float-worlds and the war-song of the starbirth empire. Of the deep green of the arena soil, of the cool spring updrafts catching in your wings, of the reddish sky above the mountains, of the mating months and the joy of victory...

The thoughts are your own and not your own. However, you fail to be disconcerted by this insight. You fall into battle-trance, unblinking and perfectly calm. An ancient war-song fills your head.

It only takes a split-second to close the distance. The machine guardian is fast indeed.

Your backhand blow comes out without thinking and sends the centaur reeling. You try to follow up with a straight, but your fist lands squarely in the halberd blade. It cleaves your arm up to the elbow. Not your real arm, the mechanical one. It doesn't hurt. You are disappointed.

The halberd slices through the air in a powerful arc and drives deeply through your shield, biting into your shoulder. You throw all your weight against the guardian to regain some room. The shield is ripped from your hands and disappears somewhere behind your enemy.

You feint an attack. The guardian falls for it and strikes to sever your arms. You keep barely out of reach, though, and only lose a few layers of your torso paint job. A mighty left swing throws the centaur against the wall.

You press in deep with a knee-strike and grab the centaur's head. The halberd is no use to it while grappling. Gleefully shrieking servos start to crush the slick skull. The first cracks appear...

Then, for a moment, nothing happens. As if time stood still. No. Your mind goes on. You clench your fist. Your real fist. The metal one just stays unmoving. The centaur peels your metal fingers open. You move to kick the centaur, but the Demolisher does not move. It doesn't yield one bit.

You have the whole lifespan of a sunflare jellyfish to contemplate the blade swishing toward your neck. You feel all the different stages of being decapitated. At last, your head spins through the air.

13 Inner Sanctum, 14h after the fusion

The Great Mother's eyes fly wide open.

"What is it?"

"I... I have lost him."

"Is he dead?"

"No... the seed has finally taken root. He cannot be destroyed easily. He is still out there, but weaker."

"But can he still stop them?"

"..."

"Will it be enough?"

"..."

"Our scouts report the first assault craft have started. They're headed towards the colony! We need to go!"

"We cannot hope to outrun them if we don't start now!"

Careful not to damage her withered, skeletal wings, Khemgi carries the Great Mother out of the sanctum.

14 Mining facility, 14h 10m after the fusion

His teeth are snapping wildly, foam sprays from his mouth - he remembers rending the jugular of a Greater Lurker - but he was trapped in a cage of steel, of treacherous, betraying, collaborating dead matter. He was - and still is - helpless. Disgust floods his mind as his skull bumps ungraciously on the slick floor.

The war song fades then, and he panics. But no, it is still there, it has merely changed pitch. Deeper, more fundamental. Basic. A steady, invincible, growling vibe.

They rip his body out of the exo-suit and throw his remains into the gutter, toward the meat grinders. Some time later, a grey bony clump is dropped into a freshly cut waste chamber. His face is a ruin, but the skull is still holding together. The skull lies there, in the darkness, breathing scarce oxygen, cherishing every stray ray of light. Waiting. Listening to the steady song.