

Halo: Broken Circle

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Centuries before the Human-Covenant War would rage across the galaxy, a similar conflict erupted between the Prophets and the Elites—two alien races at odds over the sacred artifacts left by the powerful Forerunners, who disappeared eons ago. Although they would eventually form a stable alliance called the Covenant, there are those on both sides who question this fateful union. From an Elite splinter group rebelling against the Covenant during the time of its founding...to a brave Prophet caught in the machinations of the new leadership...to the root of the betrayal that would ultimately shatter the Covenant many years later, this is the untold chapter of the most unexpected heroes emerging from a realm filled with shocking treachery and ceaseless wonder.

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San'Shyuum-Sangheili War
Skirmish of the Planet of Blue and Red
Circa 860 BCE
The First Age of Conflict

Mken "Sc're'ah'ben, a San'Shyuum High Lord of Sacred Relics, floated toward the open hatchway. He paused his antigrav chair at the door and listened, fascinated by the discordant singing of an alien world: the screeching of the planet's endlessly churning winds.

"The enemy is just beyond the ridge, High Lord," warned the Steward, his military advisor and—theoretically—his bodyguard. "There is no need to leave the pod. It would be wiser to observe from orbit, using the Eyes. The Sangheili are fierce and cunning."

High Lord Mken gave a dismissive gesture. "I have never been here before, and I will see this world firsthand. I am not without experience in combat. But if you are anxious, Steward, I shall be wary. My chair is weaponized—and I have you at hand. Stay close, but do not distract me."

"Your orders are a joy to fulfill." The Steward held back, adjusting his antigrav belt and noisily checking his pulse rifle. He seemed a trifle annoyed about being put in his place. The Steward was no doubt aware that, with his chair, Mken was better suited to protect the Steward than the reverse.

Still, Mken was indeed wary of this world, in spite of his bland bravado. He was not terribly comforted by the emplaced force field projectors set up near the pod—they moderated the wind, but would they protect him from attack? He scanned the sky for Sangheili fighter craft as he drifted his chair out the drop pod's air lock. Here he paused, his chair hovering over the blast-scarred stone the pod had landed on, and swayed his long, gold-skinned neck with sinuous aplomb as he gazed curiously about, taking in the striking color contrasts, gust-flailed dunes, and rocky outcroppings of the planet's principal continent.

The constantly shifting, shrieking winds were partly a product of the celestial objects that also gave this world its dual coloration: the blue dwarf star hanging in the sky to Mken's left, the much larger red-giant sun to his right, both just forty-five degrees above opposite horizons. As per the High Lord's orders, the pod had set down right on the Purple Line so he could appreciate the contrasting views. Hierarch J'nellin had been right to note in his monograph on the Planet of Red and Blue that the remarkable duality of hue, along either side of the Purple Line, was one of the wonders of the galaxy. On the left, the outcroppings and dunes were all gradations of blue, the sand lighter blue, the rocks darker; on the right, rugged landscape was entirely red, muted or emphatic, but all the way to the horizon. Only the relatively narrow Purple Line mixed the colors. The two suns in the binary-star system, one closer than the other, were always at the same angle, with respect to this motionless world, for there was no night on this side; the planet was prevented from spinning by the interlocking gravitational fields of the two stars. They played an eternal game of push-and-pull that would someday rip the planet apart. But until then, millennia from now, this world's placement in the galaxy made it of strategic importance to the war effort; perhaps more important, there were Forerunner relics here in this area, and more buried in other parts of the planet—the Luminary had confirmed it. The necessity of investigating Forerunner relics was the only reason the San'Shyuum had descended from high orbit to the surface of this world, risking certain confrontation with the armed and dangerous Sangheili.

The shaped stones near the pod were the remnants of an ancient city belonging to an extinct species, an unknown biped . . . but on the jutting stones were carvings that suggested they had a knowledge of the Forerunners, who had been here even earlier than the stone carvers.

The densely compact blue sun was in the east; the bigger, sprawling, more diffuse red sun bulked in the west; the planet's winds, urged by the opposed gravity that flexed back and forth, slashed first one way and then another, constantly eroding the stones with a kind of relentless brushing, turning them gradually into dunes that gave off ghostly plumes of dust and sand, plumes that shifted with the winds, as if doing a primitive dance. The red dancers flitted on one side, the blue on the other.

"It truly is a marvel," sighed Mken, absently adjusting his robes. A commander's ornately sewn ceremonial robes were impressive but not pragmatic; under them, he was fitted with clinging body armor. "It is worth the risk."

His Steward grunted noncommittally, then, remembering himself, muttered, "Your insights shine like the hub of the galaxy, High Lord."

The Steward's tendency to engage in superfluous, honorific courtesies was a mild source of annoyance to Mken. There was a subtle touch of mockery in the old-fashioned usages, which might reflect the Steward's awareness that he was chronologically elder to Mken, but having come from a lower-caste brood, was forever obliged to serve as a subordinate.

Gazing at the eerily beautiful landscape, Mken knew he was indulging his connoisseur side overmuch. He had once dreamed of being merely a relic historian, and had spent many glorious cycles studying the niceties of Forerunner design and ancient holographic renderings of the San'Shyuum homeworld, Janjur Qom.

Thinking of their homeworld, even looking at the holographs, always made him melancholy. Mken's branch of the San'Shyuum had been forced to renounce the cradle of their civilization, their planet of origin, in the aftermath of the Stoic-Reformist conflict. Mken and his peers came from the Reformist line, which had fled the homeworld in the Dreadnought-the Forerunner keyship that had been the focus of the civil war between Stoics and Reformists. And the Reformists had set about searching for sacred Forerunner relics throughout the galaxy . . . until nearly eighty cycles ago, when they had come upon the Sangheili squatting in the shadow of numerous Forerunner artifacts. The war-mad saurian race had worshipped Forerunner vestiges without regard to their true utility. Worse, they had refused to allow the San'Shyuum access. The Sangheili in turn were horrified to see that the San'Shyuum actually used some Forerunner relics for practical purposes. To the Sangheili it was desecration, heresy.

Mken's people tried conciliating the Sangheili, sending a delegation that explained that the San'Shyuum, under the direction of their Prophets, also worshipped the Forerunners . . . but to no avail. The delegates had been butchered, summarily slaughtered by the Sangheili. An all-out war had begun-and continued ever since.

"Ah well," said Mken, rippling the three long fingers of his right hand in the ancient gesture of regret-a sign that said All things flow away. "Let us get to work. Summon the Field Oversight surveillance officer. I shall consult the Eyes."

He tapped the armrest controls that summoned Eye Seven, then climbed out of the chair, stretching-he was expected to use an antigrav chair due to his high caste, but here his gravitational mod belt was enough, even in the substantial and eccentric gravity of the Planet of Blue and Red.

"High Lord," the Steward tautly remarked, "you make all too good a target by stepping out of your chair."

"We are well protected here," Mken replied. He watched as Eye Seven flew into sight, looking red itself in the western vista.

Roughly diamond-shaped, the glassy device drifted near and came to a stop. It hovered expectantly as Mken said, "Report enemy movements."

"Main enemy phalanx is northeast," the Eye responded. "They encamp beyond Ridge Fifteen, at Site Two. They are present with considerable defenses, but probability estimates suggest they plan to assault our Forerunner reliquary excavation at Site One."

"Not unexpected," Mken said thoughtfully. "Show me the key enemy positions."

The Eye projected a whirling beam of multicolored light that quickly built up a three-dimensional image of the Sangheili positions, seen from above and to the west, as per its long-distance observation. Mken stepped closer to the hologram, looking it over critically as his Steward walked around between the High Lord and the wilderness of stone and sand, nervously peering at the angling thrusts of rock formations.

In the image, Sangheili troops gathered protectively around a half-buried and tilted tower, the enormous Forerunner structure at Site Two, an imposing transmitter of some kind, sleek and efficient, showing little wear. Most of its immensity was hidden underground. Its sharp edges and polished surfaces contrasted with the red, dulled stone at the outskirts of the site. The entire scene was bathed red and red-brown in the elongated shadows.

The Sangheili were organized into roughly curving rows around the relic, facing toward the tentative San'Shyuum lines-tentative, because the San'Shyuum had no plans or forces for extensive ground combat. The San'Shyuum were simply outnumbered, and not physically capable of meeting the Sangheili at close quarters. The San'Shyuum defensive lines were here purely to protect relic hunters and retroengineering specialists. But the San'Shyuum's ground force did have the Sentinels: flying self-controlled assault constructs, shaped like squat, gray-and-white, one-eyed insects, with grapplers and antigrav undercarriages, their single "eye" a heat-beam projector. Although still something of a mystery, the Sentinels appeared to have been used by the Forerunners to defend specific installations and assets-but the San'Shyuum had adapted the Sentinels for their own purposes. The Sentinels and another, even more lethal Forerunner technology gave the San'Shyuum the edge. At least, Mken hoped it was so.

Looking closer at the hologram, Mken spotted the bunkers around Site Two-they had been reported to him before he'd come down to the surface. Beneath those bunkers were underground quarters. A great many of the Sangheili could retreat into them, if the Dreadnought was brought into play-a safe haven for the enemy, since the Dreadnought could not be used at full power where Forerunner artifacts might be damaged. Its most destructive energies were reserved for hit-and-run attacks in open space on Sangheili fleets, and had already been used with devastating results.

Before even the moderated energy of the Dreadnought could be used on Site One, San'Shyuum personnel needed to be evacuated first-when the time was right.

The San'Shyuum on this side of the ridge had been working at the Site One excavation

for some time; plans had been made to excavate Site Two, but then the Sangheili assault force had descended, arraying itself around that tilted, half-buried tower.

No matter. The San'Shyuum scientists and those who protected them were ready to leave the combat zone at a moment's notice. Their drop pods were pulsing with energy, prepared for a quick jump to orbit. For now, though, it was useful to keep the Sangheili focused.

Mken noted enemy plasma cannons set up in advance of the Sangheili lines, angled to point up the slope leading to the ridge top. Near the center cannon, an imposing Sangheili officer in silver armor stood gesturing broadly, giving instructions to a group of underlings. This officer had the aura of authority and sharp awareness that Mken instinctively knew made him both interesting and dangerous.

He pointed at the silver-armored figure, his finger activating a spotlight on the Eye image of the Sangheili. "Is that Sangheili identifiable? Any information on him?"

"Sangheili identified as Ussa "Xellus. Designation is Significant Field Commander, relatively young. Strong, quick, experienced. He came to this colony not long ago, and has completely reorganized its defenses. Surveillance shows him in almost constant activity. He is estimated as a high-innovation individual."

Mken stroked the furred wattles dangling from his jaws, tilting his oblong head thoughtfully. "Mark him for assassination, to be carried out as soon as the skirmish commences. Assign a squad of Sentinels."

"Marked for assassination," the Eye dutifully said.

Mken regretted the necessity. He'd have preferred to capture and interrogate the officer. He would like to know much more about the Sangheili, and this one might provide answers, perhaps even potentially act as liaison for the submission of the entire Sangheili race. The San'Shyuum were aware of the need for ground troops—they could not use the Dreadnought everywhere at once, and they were sure to encounter more opposition on the Path to the Great Journey. The warlike, courageous Sangheili would make ideal allies, if they could be placed under San'Shyuum authority. To do that, they would have to be taught a lesson . . . would have to be shown that the San'Shyuum were their masters. If that Sangheili commander could be brought to heel . . .

"Belay that assassination order," Mken said after pondering a moment. "Perhaps that especially clever Sangheili can be useful . . . at some point."

"High Lord, I have a relayed report," the Eye said, its tip light flashing. "Eye Thirteen informs us that an incursion party of Sangheili is advancing toward our lines."

"You'd best go into the pod and handle this from orbit, High Lord," the Steward said anxiously.

"All in good time," Mken said. It was so tedious staying on the ship. He felt more alive here, on the edge of a battle. But it would be short, abortive—really, their defense would be a kind of feint, to draw the enemy into maximum concentration. The Sangheili, when dispersed, were difficult to annihilate. They were prone to organizing themselves into effective bands of transgressors.

The Eye relayed the image from Thirteen, reproducing it in front of Mken. He could now see about two hundred Sangheili advancing on foot toward the ridge and, beyond that, Forerunner Site One; the infantry was protectively flanked by hulking armored vehicles awkwardly floating on electromagnetic fields, sparking blue in the backdrop of red light. A sizable force remained behind to guard Forerunner Site Two.

How would the Forerunners feel, Mken wondered, knowing that two races who worshipped their memory were fighting to the death over control of their ancient sites? Mken suspected they would be appalled.

But he had his duty to perform.

"Deploy the Sentinels," he told the Eye. "See that they are not too effective. We do not wish the attack entirely stemmed—the Sangheili may retreat too soon. We will draw them into a better firing position." The Sangheili could conceal themselves in the bunkers around Site Two; the more who were trapped in the open, the better.

"From what I've heard," the Steward said quietly, "the Sangheili retreat only rarely. But the High Lord, imbued with inspiration, knows best . . ."

Mken ignored him and continued to watch the Sangheili...

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