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"Halo: First Strike" available in December 2003.**

Excerpts from "Halo: The Fall of Reach", "Halo: The Flood", and "Halo: First Strike" are...

Del Rey Books

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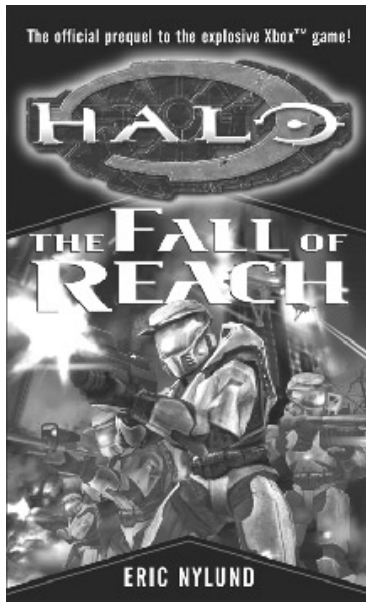
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Excerpt from "Halo: The Fall of Reach"

by Eric Nylund



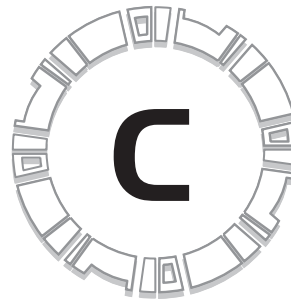
As the bloody Human-Covenant War rages on Halo, the fate of the human race may rest with one warrior, the lone SPARTAN survivor of another legendary battle...the desperate take-no-prisoners struggle that led humanity to Halo—the fall of the planet Reach. Now, brought to life, here is the full story of that glorious, doomed conflict.

While the brutal Covenant juggernaut sweeps inexorably through space, intent on wiping out humankind, only one stronghold remains—the planet Reach. Practically on Earth’s doorstep, it is the last military fortress to defy the alien onslaught. But Reach’s defenders have another, higher priority: to prevent the Covenant from discovering the location of Earth itself.

Outnumbered and outgunned, the soldiers seem to have little chance against the Covenant, but Reach holds a closely guarded secret. It is the training ground for an elite group of super soldiers, codenamed SPARTANs. These highly advanced warriors, specially bioengineered and technologically augmented, are the best in the universe—quiet, professional, and deadly.

Now, as the ferocious Covenant attack begins, a handful of SPARTANs stand ready to wage ultimate war. They will kill, they will be destroyed, but they will never surrender. And at least one of them—the SPARTAN known as the Master Chief—will live to fight another day on a mysterious and ancient artificial world called Halo...

0500 Hours. February 12, 2535 (Military Calendar) /
Lambda Serpentis System. Jericho VII Theater of Operations



contact. All teams stand by: enemy contact, my position.”

The Chief knew there were probably more than a hundred of them—motion sensors were off the scale. He wanted to see them for himself, though; his training made that lesson clear: “Machines break. Eyes don’t.”

The four Spartans that composed Blue Team covered his back, standing absolutely silent and immobile in their MJOLNIR combat armor. Someone had once commented that they looked like Greek war gods in the armor ... but his Spartans were far more effective and ruthless than Homer’s gods had ever been.

He snaked the fiber-optic probe up and over the three-meter-high stone ridge. When it was in place, the Chief linked it to his helmet’s heads-up display.

On the other side he saw a valley with eroded rock walls and a river meandering through it ... and camped along the banks as far as he could see were Grunts.

The Covenant used these stocky aliens as cannon fodder. They stood a meter tall and wore armored environment suits that replicated the atmosphere of their frozen homeworld. They reminded the Chief of biped dogs, not only in appearance, but because their speech—even with the new translation software—was an odd combination of high-pitched squeaks, guttural barks, and growls.

They were about as smart as dogs, too. But what they lacked in brainpower, they made up for in sheer tenacity. He had seen them hurl themselves at their enemies until the ground was piled high with their corpses ... and their opponents had depleted their ammunition.

These Grunts were unusually well armed: needlers, plasma pistols, and there were four stationary plasma

cannons. Those could be a problem.

One other problem: there were easily a thousand of them.

This operation had to go off without a hitch. Blue Team's mission was to draw out the Covenant rear guard and let Red Team slip through in the confusion. Red Team would then plant a HAVOK tactical nuke. When the next Covenant ship landed, dropped its shields, and started to unload its troops, they'd get a thirty-megaton surprise.

The Chief detached the optics and took a step back from the rock wall. He passed the tactical information along to his team over a secure COM channel.

"Four of us," Blue-Two whispered over the link. "And a thousand of them? Piss-poor odds for the little guys."

"Blue-Two," the Chief said, "I want you up with those Jackhammer launchers. Take out the cannons and soften the rest of them. Blue-Three and Five, you follow me up—we're on crowd control. Blue-Four: you get the welcome mat ready. Understood?"

Four blue lights winked on his heads-up display as his team acknowledged the orders.

"On my mark." The Chief crouched and readied himself. "Mark!"

Blue-Two leaped gracefully atop the ridge—three meters straight up. There was no sound as the half ton of MJOLNIR armor and Spartan landed on the limestone.

She hefted one launcher and ran along the ridge—she was the fastest Spartan on the Chief's team. He was confident those Grunts wouldn't be able to track her for the three seconds she'd be exposed. In quick succession, Blue-Two emptied both of the Jackhammer's tubes, dropped one launcher, and then fired the other rockets just as fast. The shells streaked into the Grunts' formation and detonated. One of the stationary guns flipped over, engulfed in the blast, and the gunner was flung to the ground.

She ditched the launcher, jumped down—rolled once—and was back on her feet, running at top speed to the fallback point.

The Chief, Blue-Three, and Blue-Five leaped to the top of the ridge. The Chief switched to infrared to cut through the clouds of dust and propellant exhaust just in time to see the second salvo of Jackhammers strike their targets. Two consecutive blossoms of flash, fire, and thunder decimated the front ranks of the Grunt guards, and most importantly, turned the last of the plasma cannons into smoldering wreckage.

The Chief and the others opened fire with their MA5B assault rifles—a full automatic spray of fifteen rounds per second. Armor-piercing bullets tore into the aliens, breaching their environment suits and sparking the methane tanks they carried. Gouts of flame traced wild arcs as the wounded Grunts ran in confusion and pain.

Finally the Grunts realized what was happening—and where this attack was coming from. They regrouped and charged *en masse*. An earthquake vibration coursed through the ground and shook the porous stone beneath the Chief's boots.

The three Spartans exhausted their AP clips and then, in unison, switched to shredder rounds. They fired into the tide of creatures as they surged forward. Line after line of them dropped. Scores more just trampled their fallen comrades.

Explosive needles bounced off the Chief's armor, detonating as they hit the ground.

He saw the flash of a plasma bolt—side stepped—and heard the air crackle where he had stood a split second before.

"*Inbound Covenant air support,*" Blue-Four reported over the COM link. "*ETA is two minutes, Chief.*"

"Roger that," he said. "Blue-Three and -Five: maintain fire for five seconds, then fall back. Mark!"

Their status lights winked once, acknowledging his order.

The Grunts were three meters from the wall. The Chief tossed two grenades. He, Blue-Three, and Blue-Five stepped backward off the ridge, landed, spun, and ran.

Two dull thumps reverberated though the ground. The squeals and barks of the incoming Grunts, however, drowned out the noise of the exploding grenades.

The Chief and his team sprinted up the half-kilometer sandstone slope in thirty-two seconds flat. The hill ended abruptly—a sheer drop of two hundred meters straight into the ocean.

Blue-Four's voice crackled over the COM channel: "*Welcome mat is laid out, Chief. Ready when you are.*"

The Grunts looked like a living carpet of steel-blue skin, claws, and chrome weapons. Some ran on all fours up the slope. They barked and howled, baying for the Spartans' blood.

"Roll out the carpet," the Chief told Blue-Four.

The hill exploded—plumes of pulverized sandstone and fire and smoke hurtled skyward.

The Spartans had buried a spiderweb pattern of Lotus antitank mines earlier that morning.

Sand and bits of metal pinged off of the Chief's helmet.

The Chief and his team opened fire again, picking off the remaining Grunts that were still alive and struggling to stand.

His motion detector flashed a warning. There were incoming projectiles high at two o'clock—velocities at over a hundred kilometers per hour.

Five Covenant Banshee fliers appeared over the ridge.

"New contacts. All teams, open fire!" he barked.

The Spartans, without hesitation, fired on the alien fliers. Bullet hits pinged from the fliers' chitinous armor—it would take a very lucky shot to take out the antigrav pods on the end of the craft's stubby meter-long "wings."

The fire got the aliens' attention, however. Lances of fire slashed from the Banshees' gunports.

The Chief dove and rolled to his feet. Sandstone exploded where he had stood only an instant before. Globules of molten glass sprayed the Spartans.

The Banshees screamed over their heads—then banked sharply for another pass.

"Blue-Three, Blue-Five: Theta Maneuver," the Chief called out.

Blue-Three and -Five gave him the thumbs-up signal.

They regrouped at the edge of the cliff and clipped onto the steel cables that dangled down the length of the rock wall.

“Did you set up the fougasses with fire or shrapnel?” the Chief asked.

“Both,” Blue-Three replied.

“Good.” The Chief grabbed the detonators. “Cover me.”

The fougasses were never meant to take down flying targets; the Spartans had put them there to mop up the Grunts. In the field, though, you had to improvise. Another tenet of their training: adapt or die.

The Banshees formed into a “flying V” and swooped toward them, almost brushing the ground.

The Spartans opened fire.

Bolts of superheated plasma from the Banshees punctuated the air.

The Chief dodged to the right, then to the left; he ducked. Their aim was getting better.

The Banshees were one hundred meters away, then fifty meters. Their plasma weapons might recycle fast enough to get another shot ... and at this range, the Chief wouldn’t be dodging.

The Spartans jumped backward off the cliff—guns still blazing. The Chief jumped, too, and hit the detonators.

The ten fougasses—each a steel barrel filled with napalm and spent AP and shredder casings—had been buried a few meters from the edge of the cliff, their mouths angled up at thirty degrees. When the grenades at the bottom of the barrels exploded, it made one hell of a barbecue out of anything that got in their way.

The Spartans slammed into the side of the cliff—the steel cables they were attached to twanged taut.

A wave of heat and pressure washed over them. A heartbeat later five flaming Banshees hurtled over their heads, leaving thick trails of black smoke as they arced into the water. They splashed down, then vanished beneath the emerald waves. The Spartans hung there a moment, waiting and watching with their assault rifles trained on the water.

No survivors surfaced.

They rappelled down to the beach and rendezvoused with Blue-Two and -Four.

“Red Team reports mission objective achieved, Chief,” Blue-Two said. “They send their compliments.”

“It’s hardly going to balance the scales,” Blue-Three muttered, and kicked the sand. “Not like those Grunts when they slaughtered the 105th Drop Jet Platoon. They should suffer just as much as those guys did.”

The Chief had nothing to say to that. It wasn’t his job to make things suffer—he was just here to win battles. Whatever it took.

“Blue-Two,” the Chief said. “Get me an uplink.”

“Aye aye.” She patched him into the SATCOM system.

“Mission accomplished, Captain de Blanc,” the Chief reported. “Enemy neutralized.”

“Excellent news,” the Captain said. He sighed, and added, “*But we’re pulling you out, Chief.*”

“We’re just getting warmed up down here, sir.”

“*Well, it’s a different story up here. Move out for pickup ASAP.*”

“Understood, sir.” The Chief killed the uplink. He told his team, “The party’s over, Spartans. Dust-off in fifteen.”

They jogged double-quick up the ten kilometers of the beach, and returned to their dropship—a Pelican, scuffed and dented from three days’ hard fighting. They boarded and the ship’s engines whined to life.

Blue-Two took off her helmet and scratched the stubble of her brown hair. “It’s a shame to leave this place,” she said, and leaned against the porthole. “There are so few left.”

The Chief stood by her and glanced out as they lifted into the air—there were wide rolling plains of palmgrass, the green expanse of ocean, a wispy band of clouds in the sky, and setting red suns.

“There will be other places to fight for,” he said.

“Will there?” she whispered.

The Pelican ascended rapidly through the atmosphere, the sky darkened, and soon only stars surrounded them.

In orbit, there were dozens of frigates, destroyers, and two massive carriers. Every ship had carbon scoring and holes peppering their hulls. They were all maneuvering to break orbit.

They docked in the port bay of the UNSC destroyer *Resolute*. Despite being surrounded by two meters of titanium-A battle plate and an array of modern weapons, the Chief preferred to have his feet on the ground, with real gravity, and real atmosphere to breathe—a place where he was in control, and where his life wasn’t held in the hands of anonymous pilots. A ship just wasn’t home.

The battlefield was.

The Chief rode the elevator to the bridge to make his report, taking advantage of the momentary respite to read Red Team’s after-action report in his display. As predicted, the Spartans of Red, Blue, and Green Teams—augmenting three divisions of battle-hardened UNSC Marines—had stalled a Covenant ground advance. Casualty figures were still coming in, but—on the ground, at least—the alien forces had been completely stonewalled.

A moment later the lift doors parted, and he stepped on the rubberized deck. He snapped a crisp salute to Captain de Blanc. “Sir. Reporting as ordered.”

The junior bridge officers took a step back from the Chief. They weren’t used to seeing a Spartan in full MJOLNIR armor up close—most line troops had never even seen a Spartan. The ghostly iridescent green of the armor plates and the matte black layers underneath made him look part gladiator, part machine. Or perhaps to the bridge crew, he looked as alien as the Covenant.

The view screens showed stars and Jerico VII’s four silver moons. At extreme range,

a small constellation of stars drifted closer.

The Captain waved the Chief closer as he stared at that cluster of stars—the rest of the battlegroup. “It’s happening again.”

“Request permission to remain on the bridge, sir,” the Chief said. “I ... want to see it this time, sir.”

The Captain hung his head, looking weary. He glanced at the Master Chief with haunted eyes. “Very well, Chief. After all you’ve been through to save Jericho Seven, we owe you that. We’re only thirty million kilometers out-system, though, not half as far as I’d like to be.” He turned to the NAV Officer. “Bearing one two zero. Prepare our exit vector.”

He turned to face the Chief. “We’ll stay to watch ... but if those bastards so much as twitch in our direction, we’re jumping the hell out of here.”

“Understood, sir. Thank you.”

Resolute’s engines rumbled and the ship moved off.

Three dozen Covenant ships—big ones, destroyers and cruisers—winked into view in the system. They were sleek, looking more like sharks than starcraft. Their lateral lines brightened with plasma—then discharged and rained fire down upon Jericho VII.

The Chief watched for an hour and didn’t move a muscle.

The planet’s lakes, rivers, and oceans vaporized. By tomorrow, the atmosphere would boil away, too. Fields and forests were glassy smooth and glowing red-hot in patches.

Where there had once been a paradise, only hell remained.

“Make ready to jump clear of the system,” the Captain ordered.

The Chief continued to watch, his face grim.

There had been ten years of this—the vast network of human colonies whittled down to a handful of strongholds by a merciless, implacable enemy. The Chief had killed the enemy on the ground—shot them, stabbed them, and broken them with his own two hands. On the ground, the Spartans *always* won.

The problem was, the Spartans couldn’t take their fight into space. Every minor victory on the ground turned into a major defeat in orbit.

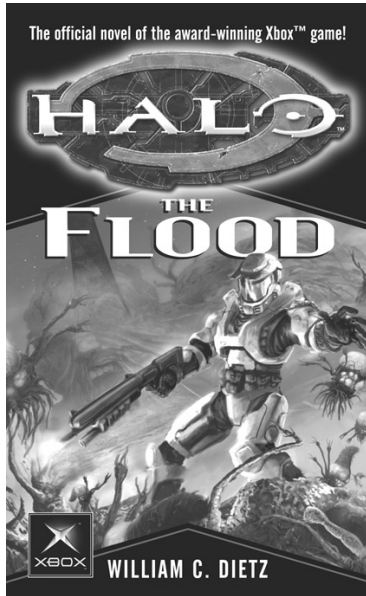
Soon there would be no more colonies, no human settlements—and nowhere left to run.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eric Nylund has a bachelor’s degree in chemistry and a master’s degree in chemical physics. He has published five novels: virtual reality thrillers *A Signal Shattered* and *Signal to Noise*; contemporary fantasy novels *Pawn’s Dream* and *Dry Water* (nominated for the 1997 World Fantasy Award); and the science-fantasy novel *A Game of Universe*. Nylund attended the 1994 Clarion West Writer’s Workshop. He lives near Seattle on a rain-drenched mountain with his wife, science fiction novelist Syne Mitchell. He is currently hard at work on a new *Halo* novel, coming in Holiday, 2003.

“Halo: The Fall of Reach” by Eric Nylund is available in paperback in bookstores everywhere!

Excerpt from "Halo: The Flood" by William C. Dietz

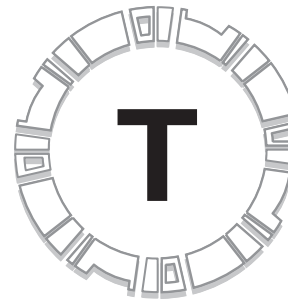


The Human-Covenant War, a desperate struggle for humanity's very survival, has reached its boiling point on the mysterious, ring-shaped world called Halo. But the fierce Covenant warriors, the mightiest alien military the universe has ever seen, are not the only peril lying in wait.

As the fortress world of Reach and its brave defenders were bombarded to rubble, a single cruiser fled the carnage with the battle's only known human survivors—Captain Keyes, his crew of “Helljumper” Marines, and the last remaining SPARTAN super-soldier, the Master Chief.

With the cruiser's artificial intelligence, Cortana, concealed in his battle armor, the Master Chief crash-lands on Halo in the midst of a massive Covenant occupation. Curiously, the alien soldiers appear to be searching for something hidden on the ring. Built by a long-dead race, Halo harbors many secrets, but one overshadows them all. Now the Master Chief must lead the scattered human survivors in a race to unravel Halo's darkest mystery—and unleash its greatest source of power...

D +17:11:04 (SPARTAN-117 Mission Clock)/Grav Lift Bay, Covenant Warship Truth and Reconciliation, above the surface of Halo.



The gravity lift deposited the rescue team three feet above the deck. They hung suspended for a moment, then fell. Parker gave a series of hand signals, and the Marine ODSs crept forward into the lift bay.

The Covenant equivalent of gear crates—tapered, rectangular boxes made from the shimmering, striated purple metal the aliens favored—were stacked around the high compartment. A pair of Covenant tanks, “Wraiths,” were lined along the right side of the bay.

The Master Chief moved forward toward one of the high metal doors that were spaced along the perimeter of the compartment.

Parker gave the all-clear signal and the Marines relaxed a bit. “There's no Covenant here,” one of them whispered, “so where the hell *are* they?”

The door was proximity activated, and as he neared the portal, it slid open and revealed a surprised Elite. Without pause, the Spartan tackled the alien and slammed its armored head into the burnished deckplates. With luck, he'd finished the Elite quietly enough—

Another set of doors flashed open on the other side of the bay, and Covenant troops boiled into the compartment.

A second Marine turned to the Corporal who'd just spoken. “No Covenant,” he snarled, mocking his fellow trooper. “You just *had* to open your mouth, didn't you?”

Inside the Covenant ship, chaos reigned. The Master Chief charged ahead, and the rescue team fought their way through a maze of interlocking corridors, which

sprang into view, and it roared again as the Spartan sprayed it with gunfire, knowing the gesture was futile, but unwilling to let the enemy at his teammates' exposed flank.

Without warning, the Hunter reared up, howled, and crashed to the ground. The Master Chief was puzzled, and briefly checked his weapon. Could he have gotten in a lucky shot?

He heard a cough, and saw Sergeant Parker struggling to his feet, a smoking M6D pistol in his hand. Blood flowed from the gashes in his side, and he was unsteady on his feet, but he found the strength to spit on the Hunter's fallen corpse.

The Chief took a covering position near the wounded sergeant. He gave him a brisk nod. "Not bad for a Marine. Thanks."

The sergeant grabbed a fallen assault rifle, slammed a fresh magazine into place, and grinned. "Any time, swabbie."

His motion sensor showed more contact inbound, but they were keeping their distance. Their failed assault on the bay must have left them disorganized. *Good*, he thought. *We need all the time we can get.* "Cortana," he said, "how much longer before you get a door open?"

"Got it!" Cortana proclaimed exultantly. One of the heavy doors hissed open. "Everyone should move through the door now. I can't guarantee that it won't lock when it closes."

"Follow me!" he barked, then led the surviving Marines out of the shuttle bay and into the comparative safety of a corridor beyond.

The next fifteen minutes were like a slow-motion nightmare as the rescuers fought their way through a maze of corridors, up a series of narrow ramps, and onto the launch bay's upper level. With Cortana's guidance, they plunged back into the ship's oppressive passageways.

As they proceeded through the bowels of the large warship, Cortana finally gave them good news: "The Captain's signal is strong. He must be close."

The Chief frowned. This was taking too long. Every passing second made it that much less likely that any of the rescue party would be able to get off the *Truth and Reconciliation* alive, let alone with Captain Keyes. The ODS'Ts were good fighters, but they were slowing him down.

He turned to Sergeant Parker and said, "Hold your men here. I'll be back soon—with the Captain."

He started to protest, then nodded. "Just don't tell Silva," he said.

"I won't."

The Master Chief ran from door to door, until one of them opened to reveal a rectangular room lined with cells. It appeared that translucent force fields served in place of bars. He dashed inside and called the Captain's name, but received no answer. A quick check confirmed that, with the exception of one dead Marine, the detention center was empty.

Frustrated, yet reassured by Cortana's insistence that the CNI signal remained strong, the Spartan exited the room, entered the hall, and literally went door to door, searching for the correct hatch. Once he located it, the Master Chief almost

wished he hadn't.

The portal slid open, a Grunt yelled something the Master Chief couldn't understand, and a plasma beam lashed past the human's helmet.

The Master Chief opened fire, heard a Marine yell from within one of the cells, "Good to see you, Chief!" and knew he was in the right place.

A plasma beam appeared out of nowhere, hit the Spartan in the chest, and triggered the armor's audible alarm. He ducked behind a support column, just in time to see an energy beam slice through the spot he had just vacated. He scanned the room, looking for his assailant.

Nothing.

His motion sensor showed faint trace movements, but he couldn't spot their source.

His eyes narrowed, and he noticed a slight shimmer in the air, directly in front of him. He fired a sustained burst through the middle of it, and was rewarded with a loud howl. The Elite seemed to materialize out of thin air, made a grab for his own entrails, and managed to catch them before he died.

He strode to the access controls, and, with Cortana's help, killed the force fields. Captain Keyes stepped out of his cell, paused to scoop a Needler off the floor, and met the Chief's eyes. "Coming here was reckless," he said, his voice harsh. The Chief was about to explain his actions when Keyes' expression warmed, and the *Autumn's* CO smiled. "Thanks."

The Spartan nodded. "Any time, sir."

"Can you find your way out?" Keyes inquired doubtfully. "The corridors of this ship are like a maze."

"It shouldn't be too difficult," the Master Chief replied. "All we have to do is follow the bodies."

Lieutenant "Cookie" Peterson put Echo-136 down a full klick from the *Pillar of Autumn*, looked out through the rain-spattered windscreen, and saw Echo-206 settle in approximately fifty meters away. It had been an uneventful flight, thanks in part to the weather, and the fact that the assault on the *Truth and Reconciliation* had probably served to distract the Covenant from what was going on elsewhere.

Peterson felt the ship shudder as the ramp hit the ground, waited for the Crew Chief to call "Clear!", and fired the Pelican's thrusters. The ship was extremely vulnerable while on the ground and he was eager to return to the relative safety of Alpha Base. Then, assuming the Helljumpers got the job done, he and his crew would be back to transport some of the survivors and their loot.

Back at Alpha Base, McKay watched Echo-136 wobble as a gust of wind hit the Pelican from the side, saw the ship gather speed, and start to climb out. Echo-206 took off a few moments later and both ships were gone within a matter of seconds.

Her people knew what they were doing, so rather than make a pest of herself,

McKay decided to wait and watch as the platoon leaders sorted things out. The officer felt the usual moments of fear, of self doubt regarding her ability to accomplish the mission, but took comfort from something an instructor once told her. "Take a look around," the instructor had advised. "Ask yourself if there's anyone else who is better qualified to do the job. Not in the entire galaxy, but right there, at that point in time. If the answer is 'yes,' ask them to accept command, and do everything you can to support them. If the answer is 'no,' which it will be ninety-nine percent of the time, then take your best shot. That's all any of us can do."

It was good advice, the kind that made a difference, and while it didn't erase McKay's fears, it certainly served to ease them.

Master Sergeant Lister and Second Lieutenant Oros seemed to materialize out of the darkness. Oros had a small, pixielike face, which belied her innate toughness. If anything happened to McKay, Oros would take over, and if *she* bought the farm Lister would step in. The battalion had been short of officers *before* the mission went sour, and what with Lieutenant Dalu off playing Supply Officer, McKay was one Platoon Leader short of a full load. That's why Lister had been called upon to fill the hole.

" platoons One and Two are ready to go," Oros reported cheerfully. "Let us at 'em!"

"You just want to raid the ship's commissary," McKay said, referring to the Platoon Leader's well-known addiction to chocolate.

"No, ma'am," Oros replied innocently, "the Lieutenant lives only to serve the needs of humanity, the Marine Corps, and the Company Commander."

Even the normally stone-faced Lister had to laugh at that, and McKay felt her own spirits lift as well. "Okay, Lieutenant Oros, the human race would be grateful if you would put a couple of your best people on point and lead this outfit to the ship. I'll ride your six with Sergeant Lister and the Second Platoon walking drag. Are you okay with that?"

Both Platoon Leaders nodded and melted into the night. McKay looked for the tail end of First Platoon, slid into line, and let her mind roam ahead. Somewhere, about one kilometer ahead, the *Pillar of Autumn* lay sprawled on the ground. The Covenant owned the ship for the moment—but McKay was determined to take her back....

"Halo: The Flood" by William C. Dietz is the best-selling novel available everywhere!

For more information, go to <http://www.delreydigital.com>

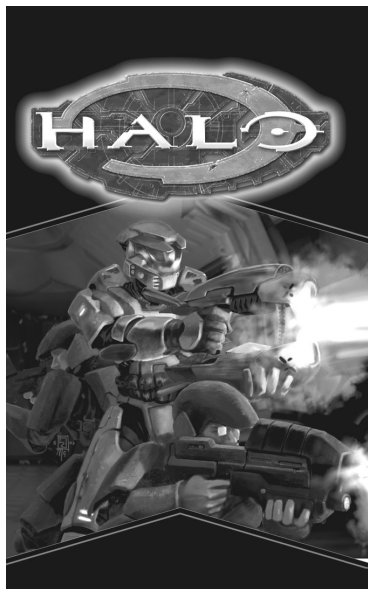
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William C. Dietz is the author of more than twenty science fiction novels.

He grew up in the Seattle area, spent time with the Navy and Marine Corps as a medic, graduated from the University of Washington, lived in Africa for half a year, and has travelled to six continents. Dietz has been variously employed as a surgical technician, college instructor, news writer, and television producer, and currently serves as the Director of Public Relations and Marketing for an international telephone company. His novels include *Legion of the Damned*, *Deathday*, and his most recent hardcover, *Earthrise*. He and his wife live in the Seattle area, where they enjoy traveling, boating, snorkeling, and, not too surprisingly, reading books.

Sneak Preview of "Halo: First Strike" by Eric Nylund

Coming in December 2003!



Cover Image is Not Final

The Human-Covenant war rages on as the alien juggernaut sweeps inexorably towards its final goal: destruction of all human life! The mysterious alien ring contruct, Halo, has been destroyed and the threat it posed to sentient life neutralized.

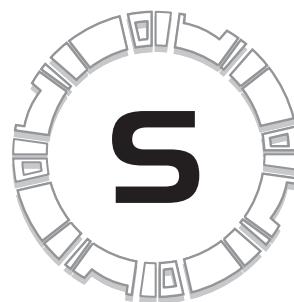
But victory has come at a terrible cost for the men and women of the UNSC, which lost hundreds of valiant soldiers in the battle over the alien construct.

Everything now depends on the Spartan known as the Master Chief. Battle-weary, and stranded, this lone Spartan faces the toughest mission of his career.

Even with the aid of the artificial intelligence Cortana, the Master Chief will be hard-pressed to rescue survivors and evade the Covenant ships patrolling the debris-strewn space that marks Halo's grave.

Ahead lies a dangerous voyage back to human-controlled space. The Master Chief and his war-torn squad must continue to battle for their own survival... and find a way to stop the Covenant, find a way to take the fight to the enemy—a *first strike*.

0622 Hours, August 30, 2552 (Military Calendar) / UNSC Vessel PILLAR OF AUTUMN, Epsilon Eridani System near Reach Station Gamma



PARTAN-104, Frederic, twirled a combat knife, his fingers nimble despite the bulky MJOLNIR combat armor that encased his body. The blade traced a complicated series of graceful arcs in the air. The few remaining Naval personnel on the deck turned pale and averted their eyes—a Spartan wielding a knife was generally accompanied by the presence of several dead bodies.

He was nervous, and this was more than the normal pre-mission jitters. The team's original objective—the capture of a Covenant ship—had been scrubbed in the face of a new enemy offensive. The Covenant was en route to Reach, the last of the UNSC's major military strongholds.

Fred couldn't help but wonder what use ground troops would be in a ship-to-ship engagement. The knife spun.

Around him, his squadmates loaded weapons, stacked gear and prepped for combat, their efforts redoubled since the ship's Captain had personally come down to the mustering area to brief the team leader, SPARTAN-117—but Fred was already squared away. Only Kelly had finished stowing gear before him.

He balanced the point of the knife on his armored finger. It hung there for several seconds, perfectly still.

A subtle shift in the *Pillar of Autumn's* gravity caused the knife to tip. Fred plucked it from the air and sheathed it in a single deft move. A cold feeling

filled his stomach as he realized what the gravity fluctuation meant: the ship had just changed course—another complication.

Master Chief SPARTAN-117—John—marched to the nearest COM panel as Captain Keyes' face filled the screen.

Fred sensed a slight movement to his right—a subtle hand signal from Kelly. He caught the motion and opened a private COM freq to his teammate.

"Looks like we're in for more surprises," she said.

"Roger that," he replied, "though I think I've had enough surprises for one op."

Kelly chuckled, then the COM line went dead.

Fred focused his attention on John's exchange with Keyes. Each Spartan—selected from an early age and trained to the pinnacle of military science—had undergone multiple augmentation procedures: biochemical, genetic, and cybernetic. As a result, a Spartan could hear a pin drop in a sandstorm, and every Spartan in the room was interested in what the Captain had to say. "*If you're going to drop into hell,*" CPO Mendez, the Spartans' first teacher, had once said, "*you may as well drop with the good intel.*"

Captain Keyes frowned on the ship's view screen, a non-regulation pipe in his hand. Though his voice was calm, the captain's grip on the pipe was white-knuckle tight, as he outlined the situation: a breach of the Cole Protocol.

As the human war effort faltered in the face of the Covenant onslaught, Vice Admiral Preston Cole instituted a series of regulations, designed to ensure that the location of Earth would remain a closely guarded secret—ship captains would scuttle their own vessels, rather than let navigational data fall into enemy hands.

Someone had been asleep at the switch this time. A single space vessel docked in Reach's orbital facilities had failed to delete its navigational database. If the NAV data fell into Covenant hands, the enemy would have a map that led straight to Earth...and an apocalypse that would consume the human race.

"Master Chief," the Captain said, "I believe the Covenant will use a pinpoint Slipspace jump to a position just off the space dock. They may try to get their troops on the station before the Super MAC guns can take out their ships. This will be a difficult mission, Chief. I'm...open to suggestions."

"We can take care of it," the Master Chief replied.

Captain Keyes eyes widened and he leaned forward in his command chair. "How exactly, Master Chief?"

"With all due respect, Sir, Spartans are trained to handle difficult missions. I'll split my squad. Three will board the space dock and make sure that NAV data does not fall into the Covenant's hands. The remainder of the Spartans will go groundside and repel the invasion forces."

Fred gritted his teeth. Given his choice, he'd rather fight the Covenant on the ground. Like his fellow Spartans, he loathed off-planet duty. The op to board the space dock would be fraught with danger at every turn—unknown enemy deployment, no gravity, useless intel, no dirt beneath his feet.

There was no question, though: the space op was the toughest duty so Fred intended to volunteer for it.

Captain Keyes considered John's suggestion. "No, Master Chief. It's too risky—we've got to make sure the Covenant doesn't get that NAV data. We'll use a nuclear mine, set it close to the docking ring, and detonate it."

"Sir, the EMP will burn out the superconductive coils of the orbital guns. And if you use the *Pillar of Autumn's* conventional weapons, the NAV database may still survive. If the Covenant search the wreckage—they may obtain the data."

"True," Keyes said and taped his pipe thoughtfully to his chin. "Very well, Master Chief. We'll go with your suggestion. I'll plot a course over the docking station. Ready your Spartans and prep two dropships. We'll launch you"—he consulted with Cortana—"in five minutes."

"Aye, Captain. We'll be ready."

"Good luck," Captain Keyes said and the view screen went black.

Fred snapped to attention as the Master Chief turned to face the Spartans. Fred began to step forward—

—but Kelly beat him to it. "Master Chief," she said, "permission to lead the space op."

She had always been faster, damn her.

"Denied," the Master Chief said. "I'll be leading that one."

"Linda and James," he continued. "You're with me. "Fred, you're Red Team Leader. You'll have tactical command of the ground operation."

"Sir!" Fred shouted and started to voice a protest—then squelched it. Now wasn't the time to question orders...as much as he wanted to. "Yes, Sir!"

"Now make ready," the Master Chief said. "We don't have much time left."

The Spartans stood a moment. Kelly called out, "Attention!" The soldiers snapped to and gave the Master Chief a crisp salute, which was promptly returned.

Fred switched to Red Team's "all-hands" freq and barked, "Let's move, Spartans! I want gear stowed in ninety seconds, and final prep in five minutes. Joshua: liaise with Cortana and get me whatever intel we've got on the drop area—I don't care if it's just weather satellite imagery, but I want pictures, and I want them ninety seconds ago."

Red Team jumped into action.

The pre-mission jitters were gone, replaced with a cold calm. There was a job to do, and Fred was eager to get to work.

Flight Officer Mitchell flinched as a stray energy burst streaked into the landing bay and vaporized a meter-wide section of bulkhead. Red-hot, molten metal splattered the Pelican dropship's viewport.

Screw this, he thought, and hit the Pelican's thrusters. The gunmetal-green transport balanced for a moment on a column of blue-white fire, then hurtled out of the *Pillar of Autumn's* launch bay and into space. Five seconds later, all hell broke loose.

Incoming energy bursts from the lead Covenant vessels cut across their vector and

slammed into a COMSat. The communications satellite broke apart, disintegrating into glittering shards.

“Better hang on,” Mitchell announced to his passengers in the dropship’s troop bay. “Company’s coming.”

A swarm of Seraphs—the Covenant’s scarab-like attack fighters—fell into tight formation and arced through space on an intercept course for the dropship.

The Pelican’s engines flared and the bulky ship plummeted toward the surface of Reach. The alien fighters accelerated and plasma bursts flickered from their gunports.

An energy bolt slashed past on the port side, narrowly missing the Pelican’s cockpit.

Mitchell’s voice crackled across the COM system: “Bravo-One to Knife Two-Six: I could use a little help here.”

He rolled the Pelican to port to avoid a massive, twisted hunk of wreckage from a patrol cutter that had strayed too close to the oncoming assault wave. Beneath the blackened plasma scorches, he could just make out the UNSC insignie. Mitchell scowled. This was getting worse by the second. “Bravo-One to Knife Two-Six, where the hell are you?” he yelled.

A quartet of wedge-shaped, angular fighters slotted into covering position on Mitchell’s scopes—Longswords, heavy fighters.

“Knife Two-Six to Bravo-One,” a terse, female voice crackled across the COM channel. “Keep your pants on. Business is good today.”

Too good. No sooner had the fighters taken escort position over his dropship than the approaching Covenant fighters opened up with a barrage of plasma fire.

Three of the Pelican’s four Longsword escorts peeled off and powered toward the Covenant ships. Against the black of space, cannons flashed and missiles etched ghostly trails; Covenant energy weapons cut through the night and explosions dotted the sky.

The Pelican and its sole escort, however, accelerated straight toward the planet. It shot past whirling wreckage; it rolled and maneuvered as missiles and plasma bolts crisscrossed their path.

Mitchell flinched as Reach’s orbital defense guns fired in a hot, actinic flash. A white ball of molten metal screamed directly over the Pelican and its escort as they rocketed beneath the defense platform’s ring-shaped superstructure.

Mitchell sent the Pelican into the planet’s atmosphere. Vaporous flames flickered across the ship’s stunted nose and the Pelican jounced from side to side.

“Bravo-One, adjust attack angle,” the Longsword pilot advised. “You’re coming in too hot.”

“Negative,” Mitchell said. “We’re getting to the surface fast—or we’re not getting there at all. Enemy contacts on my scopes at four by three o’clock.”

A dozen more Covenant Seraphs fired their engines and angled toward the two descending ships.

“Affirmative: four by three. I’ve got ’em, Bravo-One,” the Longsword pilot announced. “Give ’em hell down there.”

The Longsword flipped into a tight roll, and rocketed for the Covenant formation. There was no chance that the pilot could take out a dozen Seraphs—and Knife Two-Six

had to know that. Mitchell only hoped that the precious seconds Two-Six bought them would be enough.

The Pelican opened its intake vents and ignited afterburners, plummeting toward the ground at thirteen hundred meters per second. The faint aura of flames around the craft roared from red to blinding orange.

The Pelican’s aft section had been stripped of the padded crash seats that usually lined the section’s port and starboard sides. The life-support generators on the firewall between passenger and pilot’s compartment had also been discarded to make room. Under other circumstances, such modifications would leave the Pelican’s troop bay unusually cavernous. Every square centimeter of space, however, was occupied.

Twenty-seven Spartans braced themselves and clung to the frame of the ship; they crouched in their MJOLNIR armor to absorb the shock of their rapid descent. Their armor was half a ton of black alloy, faintly luminous green ceramic plates, and winking energy shield emitters. Polarized visors and full helmets made them look part Greek hero and part tank—more machine than human. At their feet equipment bags and ammunition boxes were lashed in place. Everything rattled as the ship jostled through the increasingly dense air.

Fred hit the COM and barked: “Brace yourselves!” The ship lurched and he struggled to keep his footing.

SPARTAN-087, Kelly, moved nearer and opened a frequency. “Chief, we’ll get that COM malfunction squared away after we hit planetside,” she said.

Fred winced when he realized that he’d just broadcast on FLEETCOM 7: he’d spammed every ship in range. Damn it.

He opened a private channel to Kelly. “Thanks,” he said. Her reply was a subtle nod.

He knew better than to make such a simple mistake—and as his second-in-command, Kelly was rattled by his mistake with the COM, too. He needed her rock solid. He needed *all* of Red Team frosty and wired tight.

Which meant that *he* needed to make sure he held it together. No more mistakes.

He checked the squad’s biomonitors. They showed all green on his heads-up display, with pulse rates only marginally accelerated. The dropship’s pilot was a different story. Mitchell’s heart fired like an assault rifle.

Any problems with Red Team weren’t physical; the biomonitors confirmed that much. Spartans were used to tough missions; UNSC High Command never sent them on any “easy” jobs.

Their job this time was to get groundside and protect the generators that powered the orbiting Magnetic Accelerator Cannon platforms. The fleet was getting ripped to shreds in space. The massive MAC guns were the only thing keeping the Covenant from overrunning their lines and taking Reach.

Fred knew that if anything had Kelly and the other Spartans rattled, it was leaving behind the Master Chief and his hand-picked Blue Team.

Fred would have infinitely preferred to be with Blue Team. He knew every Spartan here felt like they were taking the easy way out. If the ship-jockeys managed to hold off the Covenant assault wave, Red Team's mission was a milk run, albeit a necessary one.

Kelly's hand bumped into Fred's shoulder, and he recognized it as a consoling gesture. Kelly's razor-edged agility was multiplied five-fold by the reactive circuits in her MJOLNIR armor. She wouldn't have "accidentally" touched him unless she meant it, and the gesture spoke volumes.

Before he could say anything to her, the Pelican angled and gravity settled the Spartans' stomachs.

"Rough ride ahead," the pilot warned.

The Spartans bent their knees as the Pelican rolled into a tight turn. A crate broke its retaining straps, bounced, and stuck to the wall.

The COM channel blasted static and resolved into the voice of the Longsword's pilot: "Bravo Two-Six, engaging enemy fighters. Am taking heavy incoming fire—" The channel was abruptly swallowed in static.

An explosion buffeted the Pelican and bits of metal pinged off its thick hull.

Patches of armor heated and bubbled away. Energy blasts flashed through the boiling metal, filling the interior with fumes for a split-second before the ship's pressurized atmosphere blew the haze out the gash in her side.

Sunlight streamed though the lacerated titanium-A armor. The dropship lurched to port, and Fred glimpsed five Covenant Seraph fighters driving after them and wobbling in the turbulent air.

"Gotta shake 'em," the pilot screamed. "Hang on!"

The Pelican pitched forward and her engines blasted in full overload. The dropship's stabilizers tore away and the craft rolled out of control.

The Spartans grabbed onto cross beams and their gear was flung about inside the ship.

"It's going to be a helluva hot drop, Spartans," their pilot hissed over the COM. "Autopilot's programmed to angle. Reverse thrusters. Gees are takin' me out. I'll—"

A flash of light outlined the cockpit hatch and the tiny shockproof glass window shattered into the passenger compartment.

The pilot's biomonitor flat-lined.

The rate of their dizzying roll increased, and bits of metal and instruments tore free and danced around the compartment.

SPARTAN-029, Joshua, was closest to the cockpit hatch. He pulled himself up and looked in. "Plasma blast," he said. He paused for a heartbeat, then added: "I'll reroute control to the terminal here." With his right hand, he furiously tapped commands onto the keyboard mounted on the wall. The fingers of his left hand dug into the metal bulkhead.

Kelly crawled along the starboard frame, held there by the spinning motion of the out-of-control Pelican. She headed aft of the passenger compartment and punched a keypad there, priming the explosive bolts on the drop hatch.

"Fire in the hole!" she yelled.

The Spartans braced.

The hatch exploded and whipped away from the plummeting craft. Fire streamed along the outer hull. Within seconds, the compartment became a blast furnace. With the grace of a high-wire performer, Kelly leaned out of the rolling ship, her armor's energy shields flaring in the heat.

The Covenant Seraph fighters fired their lasers, but the energy weapons scattered in the superheated wake of the dropping Pelican. One alien ship tumbled out of control, too deep in the atmosphere to easily maneuver. The others veered and arced up back into space.

"Too hot for them," Kelly said. "We're on our own."

"Joshua," Fred called out. "Report."

"The autopilot's gone, and cockpit controls are offline," Joshua answered. "I can counter our spin with thrusters." He tapped in a command; the port engine shuddered and the ship's rolling slowed and ceased.

"Can we land?" Fred asked.

Joshua didn't hesitate to give the bad news. "Negative. The computer has no solution for our inbound vector." He tapped rapidly on the keyboard. "I'll buy as much time as I can."

Fred ran over their now-limited options. They had no parasails, no rocket propelled drop capsules. That left them with one simple choice: They could ride this Pelican straight into Hell...or they could get off.

"Get ready for a fast drop," Fred shouted. "Grab your gear. Pump your suit's hydrostatic gel to maximum pressure. Suck it up, Spartans—we're landing hard."

"Hard landing" was an understatement. The Spartans—and their MJOLNIR armor—were tough. The armor's energy shields, hydrostatic gel and reactive circuits, along with the Spartans' augmented skeletal structure might be enough to withstand a high-speed crash-landing...but not a super-sonic impact.

It was a dangerous gamble. If Joshua couldn't slow the Pelican's decent—they'd be paste.

"Twelve thousand meters to go," Kelly shouted, still leaning over the edge of the aft door.

Fred told the Spartans: "Ready and aft. Jump on my mark."

The Spartans grabbed their gear and moved toward the open hatch.

The Pelican's engines screamed and pulsed as Joshua angled the thruster cams to reverse positions. The deceleration pulled at the Spartan team and everyone grabbed, or made, a handhold.

Joshua brought what was left of the craft's control flaps to bear and the Pelican's nose snapped up. A sonic boom rippled through the ship as its velocity dropped below Mach 1. The frame shuddered and rivets popped.

"Eight kilometers and this brick is still dropping fast," Kelly called out.

“Joshua, get aft,” Fred ordered.

“Affirmative,” Joshua said.

The Pelican groaned and the frame pinged from the stress—and then creaked as the craft shuddered and flexed. Fred set his armored glove on the wall, and tried to will the craft to hold together a little longer.

It didn’t work. The port engine exploded and the Pelican tumbled again out of control.

Kelly and the Spartans near the aft drop hatch dropped out.

No more time.

“Jump!” Fred shouted. “*Spartans: go, go, go!*”

The rest of the Spartans crawled aft, fighting the gee forces of the tumbling Pelican. Fred grabbed Joshua—and they jumped into void.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eric Nylund has published several novels: virtual reality thrillers *A Signal Shattered* and *Signal to Noise*; contemporary fantasy novels *Pawn’s Dream* and *Dry Water* (nominated for the 1997 World Fantasy Award); and the science-fantasy novel *A Game of Universe*. He is the fan-favorite author of the first *Halo* novel, *The Fall of Reach*, and contributed to the Del Rey pulp adventure anthology *Crtmson Skies*, based on the forthcoming Xbox™ game, *Crimson Skies: High Road To Revenge*.

**“Halo: First Strike” by Eric Nylund will be available in
December, 2003.**

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