

HALO  [®]
BATTLE BORN

The image features the Halo logo, which consists of the word "HALO" in a bold, sans-serif font, followed by a stylized "O" that resembles a visor or a helmet. A registered trademark symbol (®) is located to the upper right of the "O". Below the logo, the title "BATTLE BORN" is written in a bold, sans-serif font. A thin horizontal line is positioned below the title.

HALO®
BATTLE BORN

CASSANDRA ROSE CLARKE

SCHOLASTIC INC.



Microsoft Studios **343**
INDUSTRIES™

If you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as “unsold and destroyed” to the publisher, and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this “stripped book.”

© 2019 Microsoft Corporation. All Rights Reserved. Microsoft, Halo, the Halo logo, and 343 Industries are trademarks of the Microsoft group of companies.

All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Inc., *Publishers since 1920*. SCHOLASTIC and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-25364-1

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

19 20 21 22 23

Printed in the U.S.A.

23

First printing 2019

Cover illustration by Antonio Javier Caparo

Book design by Betsy Peterschmidt

CHAPTER ONE

EVIE

Evie waited until her father was grading student projects before she approached his door. He always said that he hated to be interrupted during grading, but over the years, Evie had learned the opposite was true, that really he was grateful for the break. It meant he was more likely to say yes to whatever it was she wanted to do.

This discovery was a tactical maneuver Evie was careful not to overuse. But she suspected she would need it for the concert.

She knocked lightly on his office door. “Yes?” he called out tersely—grading did that to him. Evie slid the door open.

“I know you said not to interrupt you while you’re grading . . .” Evie leaned up against the wall and pulled her hands into the sleeves of her sweater. The room was dim, the overhead lights turned down low so that her dad could see the hologram projections more clearly.

“It’s fine.” He darkened the projector, flipped on a desk lamp, and then leaned back in his chair, like she was one of his students showing up for office hours. “What’s up?”

“I was wondering . . .” She took a deep breath, then spilled the rest out in a rush. “I was wondering if I could go to a concert tonight with Victor.”

Her dad frowned, scrunching his forehead up. “Did I just hear you ask to go to a concert? Tonight?”

Evie nodded. “Everyone’s going,” she said, a little breathlessly. “This guy from school, his band is playing, plus some other bands from Port Moyne.”

Her dad’s frown deepened.

“I’ll be there with Victor,” Evie said. “Please? Nothing cool like this ever happens here.” *And it’s not like you ever let me go to Port Moyne with you.* Port Moyne wasn’t much, but it was the biggest town next to their little seaside village of Brume-sur-Mer, big enough that it had a University of Meridian campus.

Where her dad taught.

Where his students lived.

Maybe she shouldn’t have mentioned the Port Moyne bands.

“Shouldn’t you be studying?” her dad asked.

“I did my homework already.” This, she was prepared for. “Including the extra credit for Mr. Garbett’s computer science class.”

Her dad smiled, the worry vanishing out of his features. “Good. That Mr. Garbett doesn’t challenge you enough. Was the extra credit difficult?”

Not really, but Evie figured a white lie might help her case. It was very important to her father that she be Challenged. “Totally,” she said. “Definitely harder than the usual work.”

“That’s good.” Her father rubbed at the few days’ growth of salt-and-pepper stubble on his chin. “Victor will be with you?”

She nodded.

“His parents are okay with this?”

“Of course.”

Usually the approval of the Gallardos was enough to swing her father, but tonight he just kept rubbing at his chin. The frown had come

back too. Evie tugged at her sweater's sleeves. The rain had picked up again and was pattering softly against the windows of her father's office, its soft, constant rhythm hinting at the impending rainy season.

"I don't know," her dad said. "I'm not sure a *concert* is a good place for someone like you."

Evie resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Hope fluttered inside her chest, though, since her dad had just given her an opening to use her best weapon in the war of father-daughter negotiations. She took a deep breath.

"I think Mom would want me to go."

Her dad sighed, the universal sign of parental defeat. Evie didn't want to take her chances, though.

"I mean, every time I talk to her, she tells me I need to do something besides studying. That I need to go out and experience the world."

Her dad shook his head. "Your mother is too adventurous for her own good." He paused. "But I suppose you going to a concert for one night won't hurt anything."

Evie shrieked with delight and threw her arms around her father's neck. "Oh, thank you, thank you! Victor's going to be so excited—he didn't want to go by himself. You're the best, Dad." She kissed him on the cheek.

"Yeah, yeah. Now get out of here so I can finish my grading. And remember that your curfew is still in place!"

"I know!" Evie bounded over to the door and gave her dad a little wave. He flicked the holo-projector back on in response.

Evie stepped out into the hallway and let the door ease shut behind her. The house was quiet except for the rain falling across the roof. Maybe it wasn't *entirely* fair to bring her mom into it, but it was true—Evie's mom was always telling her to go out and rebel. "Just a

little,” she’d say, smiling through the transmission’s interference. “Evie, you’re almost eighteen. Don’t let your dad keep you locked up like his little scholarly princess.” And Evie’s dad would scoff at that, shake his head, and her mom, every time, would say, “My rebellious streak is why your father married me,” with a sly little smile that made Evie’s dad blush.

Evie’s mom was a soldier, which was weird for Evie to think about. She hadn’t always been a soldier. But five years ago she had enlisted in the United Nations Space Command and disappeared into the starry night sky to fight aliens. Sometimes when Evie thought about it, her chest would get hard and tight, like a fist was squeezing around her heart. Her father told her she should be proud, and she was. But her mom being gone meant the house always felt empty and echoing, like it couldn’t make sense of the blank space where Evie’s mother should be.

Evie shook her head—her mom wouldn’t want her getting morose like this. In fact, her mom was going to be thrilled during the next transmission, when Evie told her all about the concert. Her first concert! Excitement arced down Evie’s spine—excitement and anxiety. She needed to get ready. She had to figure out what someone would wear to a concert, especially this concert, which was happening down in the old town bomb shelter. At least her dad hadn’t asked about *that*. Probably he assumed it would be at the meeting hall downtown.

Evie scurried up to her bedroom, heart pounding, her thoughts flipping through the latest VR concert she’d watched of her favorite bands. VR was fun—but now she was going out, *really* going out. And for the moment, at least, the house seemed a lot less empty.

Victor was waiting for her in the usual spot, beneath the big banyan tree that grew at the entrance to her neighborhood. He lived across the highway, down on the beach, where his parents owned a seaside motel. He

also had a car, which idled beside the tree, the headlights shining on the thick, draping vines and on Victor, who stood out in the rain with his comm pad focused on something up in the tree.

“What are you doing?” Evie called out.

“Shhh.” Victor tilted the comm pad up. Evie crept over to him and held the umbrella over his head—not that he noticed. Too involved in his art.

Evie leaned over his shoulder, peering at the image on the comm pad’s view screen. The car’s headlights carved the tree branches into shadows, but there was something moving in the darkness.

“A sardans cat,” Victor breathed softly. “I’ve never seen one in the wild before.”

Evie scanned the tree branches until she saw a pair of glowing yellow eyes set into a round face with tufted ears. The cat clung to the branches, its long, sleek body hunched up tight, its tail dangling like a hook.

“What’s it doing so close to town?” she whispered. Sardans cats lived deep in the surrounding forests, stalking through the thick, lush overgrowth. They were terrified of humans and never came into town. Or, almost never, apparently.

“I don’t know.” Victor took a hesitant step forward. The cat stared at him warily with its bright eyes. The end of its tail twitched. Rain whispered around them.

There was a sudden crack of thunder, a brilliant flash of lightning. In the explosion of light, the cat dove out of the tree’s branches and disappeared down the dark, rainy highway.

“Well, that was cool while it lasted.” Victor stopped recording and slipped the comm pad back into his pocket.

“How’d you even see it?” Evie stared up at the now-empty tree branches in wonder. “I mean, I could barely make it out, and I was looking for it.”

Victor opened his car door. “Lucky shot. It ran in front of me while I was driving. I swerved and saw it go up the tree.”

Evie peered up at the tree a few seconds longer. A sardans cat showing up in town. It felt like an omen, like some secret message from the universe. Not that Evie believed in that sort of thing. But the forests were protected land. No one could build out there—what could possibly have drawn it so far away from its home?

A blare of a car horn. Evie jumped. Victor waved at her from behind the windshield. “Come on!” he shouted. “It’s gone, and I’m freaking freezing.”

Evie smiled. “Shouldn’t have stood out in the rain,” she called, before climbing into his car. She shook the rain off the umbrella as best she could and tossed it in the back seat. Victor had turned the heater on and ruffled his damp hair at the vents.

“Yeah, but it was the shot of a lifetime,” he said. “Once I get that up on my comm channel, it’ll be great exposure.”

“People do love cat videos.”

Victor snorted and gave his hair one last shake, then put the car into gear and pulled out onto the freeway. “A sardans cat. Crazy.”

“Yeah.” Evie looked at the patterns of raindrops forming on the window. She could almost make out her reflection in the darkened glass. “I wonder what it was doing out here.”

“I bet the UNSC is screwing around in the forest.” Victor tapped the steering wheel. “Running training exercises and stuff. We should sneak out there and try to record them.”

“Are you kidding me?” Evie laughed, “What would your sisters say about that?”

Victor glanced at her sideways. “They would say it was totally bad-ass.”

“They would not.” Victor’s sisters had both joined up with the

UNSC when they finished high school. His oldest sister, Camila, had actually served under Evie's mother at some point, although they didn't see each other much now. Once when Camila came back to visit, she showed Victor and Evie how to fire her rifle, and they went out to the beach and shot at the sand dunes, the sand glittering as it exploded in the sun. Evie's mom, in contrast, refused to talk about the fighting when she was home. "Just let me pretend things are normal for a weekend," she always said, stretched out on the hammock in their backyard.

"Anyway," Evie said, "I doubt it's UNSC. The forests around here are protected, remember? And they wouldn't train so close to civilians anyway."

Victor shrugged. "There are, like, five hundred people in this town. We barely count as civilization."

Well, that was true enough. It only took ten minutes to drive from the banyan tree to the other edge of town, where the main entrance to the shelter was located. Evie suspected other concertgoers would trickle in from the other entrances closer to the center of town, winding their way through the maze of tunnels to the concert space. Outside the entrance, the houses were big and sprawling, designed to look like chateaus from old Earth. They were also empty and overgrown these days. Before Evie was born, rich people from all over the galaxy used to come vacation in Brume-sur-Mer, but the war put an end to that. Now rich Meridians didn't want to travel here. And so the beautiful stone palaces where they used to stay had started to crumble and fall back to the forest.

"Where is this thing again?" Victor grumbled.

"The entrance? I thought you knew."

"I know the general *area*—oh. Never mind, I found it."

They had turned a corner, and the entrance was impossible to miss—lit up with a couple of blue spotlights, cars parked haphazardly on the street around it, clumps of unfamiliar people spilling out into the

overgrown yard of one of the vacation homes. Everyone had long, glossy hair, their eyes painted with luminescent makeup. Evie knew, seeing them, that her own makeup was all wrong. Too understated, too subtle.

Victor drove up to the curb in front of the vacation home and killed the engine. Then he pulled out his comm pad.

“Are you really going to film this whole thing?” she asked.

“Yeah.” Victor made a show of rolling his eyes. “I told Dorian I would.”

“Since when do you talk to Dorian Nguyen?”

Victor scowled. “We’re in calculus together. He saw me screwing around with my channel and asked if I could film the show tonight.”

Evie shrugged, more surprised that someone like Dorian was taking calculus.

They both climbed out of the car, and Victor stumbled around with his comm pad, taking in shots of the crowd and the dilapidated houses. Evie ambled over to the entrance to the shelter, where a tall man with a scraggly beard was scanning people’s IDs and collecting the ten-credit entrance fee.

“You coming in or not?” he barked at her.

Evie jumped and glanced over at Victor, who was lurking next to a streetlamp, trying to film a pair of particularly gruesome-looking concertgoers, their faces streaked with purple and white makeup and their hair twisted up into vicious spikes. They hadn’t seemed to notice Victor yet.

“Just a second,” she said, and she marched over to him and grabbed his forearm.

“Hey!”

“Don’t film people without permission,” Evie said. “Plus, you said you’d buy my ticket. Since I got lunch the other day.”

“How do you know I didn’t have their permission?” Victor grumbled, although he was fumbling around in his pocket for his credit chips.

“Like you would have the guts to talk to those two guys. They look like they’re part of the Covenant.”

Victor grinned. “Yeah, that’s the whole thing with these bands! It’s for the shock value.”

Easy enough to do something like that out on Meridian, Evie thought, irritated. They were far enough from the fighting that the Covenant felt distant. As distant as her mother.

As promised, Victor paid for Evie’s ticket, and the bouncer activated something in their ID chips to note that they were both underage. Then he let them into the narrow, dank stairwell that led down the shelter. Music clanked off the walls—a shriek of a guitar, some disconsolate banging of drums—but mostly the stairs were filled with excited, echoing voices. Probably the most people who had been down here since the things were built. That was assuming, of course, you accepted the official story, that the shelter had been built at the start of the Human-Covenant War so that the rich tourists would be protected in case of an attack. But rumors floated around that the shelter was even older than that, that it had been used during the Insurrection, as protection for the rebels, the Sundered Legion. It was all ancient history these days. But still, Evie felt that quiver of the past as she clomped down the stairs in her mom’s old boots. At least she’d worn the right shoes.

The stairwell opened up into a cavernous metal-clad room, mostly empty save for the people pressed around a stage that had been set up on the far side. The walls were mottled and streaked with what, for a jolted moment, Evie thought was blood—but no, it was just rust, running in thin stripes through the old metal. The floor was paved with concrete, save for a grated gap cutting through the room. Evie wandered over to it, peered down into the darkness.

“To stop flooding,” Victor said.

Evie jumped. “What?”

“My dad explained it to me. They were worried about the shelter flooding during the rainy season, so they built rivers into it.” He leaned over the grating, his dark hair falling across his eyes. “Not much in there yet.”

“Huh.” Evie poked at the grating with her toe. It wobbled in its frame. “Weird.”

“Yeah, especially since it’s not like we get tourists during the rainy season.” Victor whipped out his comm pad and turned on the video recorder. He took a long shot of the grating. “My dad says it wasn’t built for the tourists at all, you know.”

Evie rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah, I know the stories. But it’s not like the town doesn’t need shelter too.”

Victor shrugged and kept filming. Evie scanned the crowd, looking for anyone she knew. A couple of girls from her colonial history class were there, standing in a circle over in the corner, and she spotted a handful of people she recognized from the hallways.

“Hey, there’s your boyfriend,” she said, nudging Victor.

“What?” He blinked up at her. She pointed to a spot next to the speakers.

“Dorian. He’s the whole reason you’re here, right?”

“We talk sometimes. God’s sake, Evie.” Victor swung his comm pad around, taking in the crowd. Over at the speakers, Dorian lounged against the rust-streaked wall, tapping furiously on his own comm pad, holo-light shining into his face. He wasn’t like any of the other boys at their school. He had the same long hair as the Port Moyne guys, and his clothes always seemed frayed at the edges, like they were on the verge of unraveling. Plus, he skipped class, like, all the time.

Evie left Victor to his filming and ambled closer to the crowd at the stage. The band was taking their places, picking up their instruments,

sending a few jagged guitar chords out into the world. Dorian had slipped onstage too, behind the holographic impressions of an elaborate QJ setup. One of the guitarists gave him a head jerk of acknowledgment.

They began playing almost immediately, not bothering to announce themselves, just releasing a torrent of music that burned in Evie's ears. The crowd started jumping around, and Evie wriggled her way to the back, away from the crush of bodies. Then she stood awkwardly, unsure what to do with her hands. She caught sight of Victor with his comm pad, trying to move closer to the stage. The band thrashed around, and the lead singer howled lyrics in that half-English, half-French pidgin old people used sometimes. Evie slid farther and farther back, away from the noise and the tumult.

She bumped up against someone, and her face flushed hot with embarrassment. When she turned around to apologize, she was startled to see Saskia Nazari slouching coolly behind her.

"Oh," she said, then realized there was no way Saskia could hear her. "I'm sorry," she shouted.

Saskia shrugged in that offhand way she did everything. Her bare shoulder poked out of the drape of her fashionable silk dress. She looked even more out of place than Evie did.

Evie took a few steps away and crossed her arms over her chest. She couldn't stop herself from glancing sideways at Saskia, though, who stood with one hand on her hip, her head tilted to the side, her body bouncing slightly to the beat of the music. It was disconcerting seeing her here, in this run-down shelter, listening to a local band torment their instruments. Disconcerting still to see that she seemed to be enjoying herself.

The band finished their first song, and the lead singer screamed something into the microphone that might have been the band's name.



Saskia applauded with her hands in the air. So *weird*. She never talked to anyone during school, just sat in the middle row of her classes in her expensive, stylish clothes, always looking bored out of her mind. Afterward she vanished to that huge locked-down house set deep in the woods on a strip of private beach. Her parents did something with weapons manufacturing. Tourists who decided to become local.

Evie wondered where Victor had scurried off to; filming Saskia was exactly the sort of thing he'd want to do, especially with the way the crowd seemed to part around her, like she was carting around one of her parents' experimental weapons. Plus, Evie had seen the way Victor looked at Saskia whenever she brushed past him at school. Like she was a work of art.

Everything in the shelter cut out.

The stage lights, the music, even the safety lighting in the stairwell: All of it vanished, and the room slid from a swirl of sound and chaos into a void. But only for a split second, before everyone started shouting like little kids afraid of the dark. Comm pads came out, transformed into spheres of light that bobbed in the darkness. Evie pulled out her own comm pad and turned on the light and shone it around. She spotted Victor loping toward her, the record light on his comm pad still blinking. Of course. He was probably lapping this up.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Circuit likely blew. I'm sure the wiring in this place is complete crap."

Evie frowned. Then a hundred alarms went off at once. Everyone's comm pad lit up with blue and red lights, and the voice of Salome, the town's artificial intelligence, came spilling out of all of them, speaking in unison with itself:

"Attention, citizens of Brume-sur-Mer. A power failure has been noted—"



“It’s all over town?” Evie said.

“—and I’m in the process of fixing it up again. Hold tight!”

The red and blue lights blinked out; the crowd grumbled.

“Think it was the storm?” Victor asked.

“That wasn’t a storm,” Evie said. “Just some rain. And it wouldn’t have knocked out power to the whole—”

The lights came back on. Not just the stage lights, but the overhead lights too, flooding the room with a sallow, flickering glow. Up on stage, Dorian hit a key on the computer, releasing a wave of some distorted, sampled audio, and the band took up playing like nothing had happened.

