



PREDATION

THE AGE OF CREST AND BONE

BY SHANNA GERMAIN



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The Age of Crest and Bone

Shanna Germain

The haddys are restless today. Delta looks to the sky to see if he can spot the reason. But the blue is clear. No pterosaurs fly overhead. No cyberdrones either. Even the red-grey plumes that sometimes puff up from the Tantrum are faint.

The haddys wave their crests at each other. If they were farther apart, they'd be calling their deep calls. But they're nearly silent, talking with the voiceless actions of heads and crests. He wishes he knew what they were saying.

"Calm," he says, trying to keep his voice low enough not to startle but loud enough that the whole herd can hear. "Calm." One of the youngest haddys—a yearling called Zin—scoots forward and tries to hide his duckbilled face under Delta's arm. Even at a year old, the creature's way too big, and has to practically kneel just to try.

"Nope," Delta says, pushing him away, laughing. "Your head doesn't fit under there. Also, what are you so scared of? There's nothing up there. See?"

Even as he speaks, he glances again at the sky. Just to be sure. He trusts the dinosaurs' instincts on when to be nervous. And it makes it worse somehow that they're nervous and he doesn't know why.

He's got another hour or two out here in the hills with the herd before they can head back. Any earlier and his mom will have a fit. Not that he *wants* to go back sooner. If it's a choice between home, where his mom can give him chores like scrubbing out the water troughs or holding together pieces of some device that she's soldering, or out here with the herd, he'll take the herd any day. There's sky out here, and something closer to freedom.

His sister Idoya comes over the rise, singing a nasally, off-key song. He can tell she's making the words up as she goes along, because the only part she knows well enough to belt out is the chorus, something about sunshine and... spiders? gliders? riders? All three, maybe. It's a fine enough rhyme. And as horrendous as her singing is, the haddys don't seem to mind it. In fact, they often act like they like it. Which is proof enough to him that haddys don't hear the same way as humans do. But they calm a little as she comes near the herd, so he doesn't shush her as he's wont to do at home.

"Mom says it's time to bring them in," Idoya says, the words wrapping into her song like misplaced lyrics.

"Why?" he asks.

She brings her fingers together into a scramble. *Storm's coming*, her fingers say.

Their mom taught them fingerspeak when Idoya was little. She has something special in her brain that makes it hard for her to find words sometimes.

Their mom is a scientist. *I'm an aeternologist, honey*, she'd say, if she could hear him. As if that was the first

time she'd ever told him that. She is proud of what she does, which as far as Delta can tell is pretty much nothing. A scientist of time travel who has never time traveled and doesn't even understand how it works? How can that even be a thing?

He gets that time travel *used* to be a thing. He knows it's how his grandma—who died before he was born—came back here from the future. But time travel's been broken since before his mom was even born. So how can you become a scientist for a thing that has never existed in your whole life?

"Hey, Idoya," he asks. "Storm-storm or time storm?" One means they have to move. The other means they have to *move*. Delta's never been caught in a time storm—other than the one whose name he bears and he hopes he never has to hear *that* story again—but he's heard about them enough. He knows they're called time terrors, even though that's a word his mother would ever use. His best friend, only friend, Rick from across the river—who comes from a family where no one is named after weather or elements of the landscape—told him all about them.

In a no-answer, Idoya shrugs with one shoulder and rubs the head of the haddy closest to her. Bal. One of the oldest, and the pseudo leader of the herd, he thinks. Although sometimes they trade off. He can't always tell who's in charge. The other haddys push in toward her, nuzzle her pockets for treats or playthings.

"Idoya," he pushes. "What kind of storm?"

She leans and sings something to Bal, but not loud enough that Delta can hear.

The anger at his sister's inability to communicate lasts only a moment, and he's embarrassed at how hot

and white it is in its flare. *Idoya's very special, honey. She's doing her best.* Their mother's words, but he's heard them so often they've become his own.

"Okay," he says. "Want to help me take them in?"

She squints her eyes at him. She's telling him that she's not dumb, that she knows his kindness for what it is, an unearned offering. But he also knows she loves the haddys. That she won't say no even if her pride tells her she should. Her fingers dance with yes.

He lets her lead and stays off to the herd's left. The creatures are still antsy, but less so. Maybe because they're moving. Maybe because of Idoya. Maybe because whatever invisible threat they thought they perceived has moved on.

Delta loves the haddys too, but not like Idoya does. He's never told anyone this, but he'd trade them all in a heartbeat. Not to leave this, exactly—he doesn't hate the farm or their farmhouse or their life here—but to have the chance to go somewhere, anywhere, else. Maybe that city he's seen in his mom's digital histories. The ones she watches sometimes after she thinks he's asleep. The ones she doesn't know he watches. Kelaino. It has science machines and streets and people. So many people. And buildings as tall as the sky. He would give anything to see a city like that.

Zin nudges up beside him, chirping in his baby-pitch. "Okay, maybe not you," he says as he pats the creature's neck. "I wouldn't trade you."

Ahead of him, Idoya walks backwards, facing the following herd, her bare feet steady across the earth even though she doesn't look down. She's wearing feathers twined in her hair, long blue ones that he hasn't seen before. They haddys have more fuzz than feathers, and

the alphas that share their house are furred. These are blue like her eyes. Almost the same. Which means she's probably been climbing mom's forbidden time-travel towers. The pterosaurs that nest up there are big enough to eat Idoya. Big enough to eat a haddy, for that matter. She calls them her friends. He should tell mom, but he won't. So few things delight her; he can't bear to take that away. Not even to keep her safe.

"Tell me the haddy's names," he says, because he is still feeling bad at how angry he gets at her sometimes and she loves to tell him what each of them is called.

"Ama," she song-whispers, but this time it's loud enough for him to hear. "Bal. Cinder. Dyna..." She always chooses alphabetical, which is also basically their birth order, and points to each haddy in turn.

Zin comes last. When he hears his name, he comes loping up to her. He's super gangly still, all long legs and giant feet and huge face. He only recently started walking on all fours, and everything he does now is fast but awkward, like he's just discovered new parts of his body and hasn't quite figured out what they're for.

Zin won't be the baby of the family for much longer. There's a crop of new babies coming. He guesses they'll have to start over with A names. Maybe double aa names, like Aahn or Aard. There are three nests back at the farm, as big as he and Idoya put together. He's not sure who they belong to, exactly. It seems the adults are always switching up. His mom has a word for it that he can't remember now. Something about being social. Or nearly social.

"The whole group cares for the young. They're protective." His mom, explaining to him why he shouldn't go near the haddy nests, even though they know him and like him.

“Why don’t we have a whole group? Why do we have just you?” were the kinds of questions their mom never had an answer for. Or at least not a good one. She always said something like “go play with your sister” or “hand me that utility clamp.”

Someday he’ll ask her about the cities. About their missing group. About the future that his grandma came from. He aches, not for knowledge, but for understanding. For experiencing. For something larger than himself. No, not larger. Almost everything is larger than he is. He aches for something amazing.

As they start down the hill—the house and barn and their mom’s towers coming into view—the haddys get jumpy again. The elders’ voices are deep, low brays. The noises that come from their crests as they signal their alarm are haunting, a resonance that Delta is close enough to feel in his bones. They give Delta the shivers. Zin starts running around in tightening circles, squonking. So does Idoya. Well, minus the squonks. Instead she’s singing, “Storm coming, storm coming, everybody’s running, everybody’s running.”

Something is moving off in the trees to the right of the house. A shadow. Multiple shadows. Darknesses with form and shape. Upright. Deliberate. Delta’s heart beats through his whole body. Like he has a new baby heart in each limb, each side of his throat, the back of his mouth.

“Shhh...” Delta says, to all of them at once. Only Zin listens. The yearling stops and drops, going from a gangly, loping dinosaur to the top of an unmoving head crest rising above the ground plants. It’s a skill all the younglings know, this sudden stillness. Delta wishes Idoya knew it. She’s got her back to the house and the woods still, facing him, still singing.

“Id,” he says. He makes it a game, drops himself to the ground next to Zin with a flourish. “Get low with us.”

“Fun!” she says. Far louder than he’d like, but she runs over and drops down on the other side of Zin.

He waits until he’s sure she’s looking at him, then draws his hand across his closed eyes. Holds up five fingers. Makes the sign for haddys. Bowing fist with two fingers drawn up as a crest.

Can you stay here for five minutes? Like hide-and-seek? You and the haddys?

She whispers something into the side of Zin’s face. He takes it as a yes.

He signs a word which means something like love and something like protection, but mostly it means *we’ll do this together*. She gives it back to him, grinning.

Delta starts pushing himself closer to the downward slope in front of them. He’s lost the shadows, but a moment later one shadow becomes a real human. A man, dressed in a chunky white uniform made of pieces, strides from the trees. He’s got an orange nautilus on his shoulder. Like the kind on their money.

SATI. What are they doing here? Space and Time, Interglobal is the company that brought his grandma here, to dinosaur time. The one—his mom says—that taught her to be an aeternologist.

Two more follow, one with a blue-feathered microraptor fluttering its wings on his shoulder. He’s never seen any of these people before. Not the uniforms either, made of some kind of shiny plastic.

They’re heading for the house.

Delta doesn’t know what to do. No one comes to visit them. Almost no one except Rick and his family and the man who delivers supplies sometimes even knows where

they live. His mom has told him a hundred, a million-trillion times how important that is, that no one knows where they live.

But these people know. They are walking straight toward the front door.

Delta sees with alarm that the blue light over their front door isn't lit. His mom must have turned the security system off when Idoya left. Idoya never remembers the system; she sets it off by accident every time she comes home. And then she cries. The alarm is loud and it hurts—two things she hates—so you'd think she'd be cautious after the first time. But she never is.

The lights in his mom's lab are still on. Through the window, he can see her head still bowed over her work. Her dark hair is pulled high in a ponytail and there's some tool stuck into her hair. She doesn't know about the people outside; he can tell by her lack of reaction.

Delta glances back at Idoya. She's lying on her back next to Zin, her bare feet up in their air next to Zin's crest. For a moment, he almost tells her to stay put, but then remembers how well she does with directions. Especially from him. "Where's Idoya?" he soft-calls. "I can't find her anywhere!"

She giggles. Zin coos in response. Delta's heart lightens for a beat. And then he remembers the men. His mom. The unlit alarm light.

He turns and starts to crawl forward, thighs and elbows, through the scratching plants. Down the hill. Toward everything he has ever known.

What will he do once he gets there? He doesn't know. He's prepared to watch out for predators. Keep the haddys and Idoya in line. Tend the fields and hand his mom her tools sometimes.

He is not prepared for whatever this is.



The three people stand on the porch a long while. Quiet. He can't tell what they're doing. They haven't knocked. Or opened the door. Or, as far as he can tell, even called out.

Delta's crouched behind a fernrow at the edge of fields, waiting for them to do something. But he's been here so long his thighs ache and tremble, and he's not sure if they're ever going to move. The tall one with the black hair talks a lot, gesturing with his hands. The one with the microraptor mostly nods and listens. The last one, he sees now isn't a man at all. It's a woman wearing her red hair in a short cut. Her face is sad and crisscrossed with techtats.

Their mom used to have some of those. The sadness but also the thin strips of metal that curved along the edge of her cheekbone. A few years back, she'd sent Delta and Idoya out to gather ginko fruit, and when they'd come back, baskets loaded and bellies full, the side of her face had been bandaged and swollen. Now she has a scar like a sideways smile.

The tall man and the woman open the door and go in. They don't knock or say anything. They just walk in like it's their house. Which of course it isn't.

The one with the raptor stays on the porch, standing and watching the sky. He's got a tracker device on his hip, next to something that Delta's never seen before but which he's pretty sure is a weapon of some kind. Weapons come in all different kinds, but there's something about them that's the same. Like on the outside they're made

to look sweet and innocent, but inside they're just made to kill you.

The raptor rises off the railing with a squawk, winging in slow, slanted circles. Delta looks toward Idoya and the herd on the rise. Thankfully, neither the raptor nor the man seems to have noticed them. Not yet.

The microraptor tilts as he watches, moves its circle in tighter and tighter circles. Hunting spirals. Delta is sure it has seen him. He holds his breath, wills his legs still. The ferns tremble with every breath.

The creature passes him by in a flutter of feathers, and Delta exhales, as quiet as he can.

With a low cry, the creature straightens out its circle and heads toward the side of the hill. Idoya. Idoya's up there. With the haddys.

Pushing himself from his hiding place, he runs toward the microraptor, yelling. He sounds like Zin, all honk and squonk, but he catches the creature's attention. He barely makes it halfway across the space before the creature is circling back. The man on the porch says, "Hey!" and Delta hears thudding footsteps coming for him. They both come toward him. One high, one low. He feels trapped in the space between them, an alphadon in a snare. He doesn't know where to go, which way to run.

"Wait," he says, low and quiet as they close in. "Wait." His hands up, like he's talking to the haddys.

They don't listen. Delta thinks to run, but the message can't make his legs before the man strides forward and takes his arm. Not tight enough to hurt, but tight enough to lock hold. The microraptor drops to the man's shoulder, on a piece of leather draped over the white uniform. The creature smells of fresh blood and rotting fruits.

"You live here?" the man says. His voice is thin and in

his nose. He says *here* funny, like it's got a hiccup in the middle and a spoken vowel on the end. *Heyh-uh*.

Delta can't remember what his words sound like, so he just nods. The man looks him over, head tilted. He runs a hand through his curly hair, down the back of his neck, and says, "I'll be damned. Guess you'd better go inside."

Delta doesn't dare look at Idoya. He keeps his face forward as they move toward the house. He wishes the blue light was on. He wishes the man would touch the doorknob and get stung. He'd run and get his mom and together they'd get Idoya. His mom would know what to do.

Having the man open his own door for him is weird. "Hey Kara!" the man yells over Delta's head. "I found you sompthin' might be of interest."

To Delta he says, "You can go right on in," like it's not his own house and he doesn't already know that he can go right on in, thank you very much. He decides that he for sure doesn't like this man. Doesn't like his microraptor, who tilts a head and watches him with a black eye.

Delta doesn't move until the man pulls himself back out onto the porch and shuts the front door behind him. It's a small house; there's not much space between the front room and the lab, but he's a small boy. When he steps, he is careful not to make a sound.

"What's Santi on about?" A voice from inside his mom's lab. The tall man, he guesses, who seems to be musing to himself, because no one answers him.

Delta stops when he hears his mom's voice say, "I'm not going back."

"You have to, Phee," the woman says. "They gave you all the time you asked for."

“And then some,” the man adds. “Since you managed to hide yourself out here in the timeforsaken wilderness. Took us four years...four years!...to find you, Phoenix. Four years I’ll never get back.”

Delta realizes that until this moment, he didn’t know his mom’s name. Phoenix. He doesn’t know that word, but it doesn’t suit her. It’s like when the haddys are molting and their skin goes loose and wobbly.

His mom speaks and sounds nothing like his mom. He has to peek around the doorway to be sure it’s really her. She’s moving things around on her lab table, refusing to look at the two of them. “I had a good reason, Kara,” she says. “You know I did.”

“You made a promise,” the woman—Kara—says. “To SATI. To us.”

The tall man takes a single step forward, closing in on his mom. “You and the boy—”

“Delta,” his mom says. Her voice is hard and rising. She thumps her fist against the lab table. It kind of scares him. His mom is quiet and firm, with an absent, haunted voice. Who is this woman who thumps her fist and lifts her words? “His name is Delta.”

“Delta, then,” he acknowledges with a sigh. “You and Delta need to come back to Kelaino. Now. Today.”

Kelaino. That’s where they’re from? The big city in her digital histories is their home? Was their home? He can’t remember that, if it’s true. Why can’t he remember it? And why is his mom refusing? He wants to run into the room yelling, “Yes! We’ll go with you!” but something holds his feet still and his mouth closed. He tells himself it’s not fear.

“Can’t you just... pretend?” his mom says. “Pretend that you didn’t find me? You must have a hundred scientists by now, as good or better than me. I’m out of

practice, out of touch. I raise livestock. I tinker. I raise k—Delta. I’m not the one SATI wants anymore.”

Why isn’t she saying anything about Idoya? Thinking it makes him worry, suddenly. She’s still out there with that man and the microraptor. What if they find her?

The woman reaches out and touches his mom’s arm. Their fingers are the same. Their hands. The curves of their jaws, with and without the techtats. They’re of the same herd, he thinks. No, family. They’re of the same family. His family too.

“Phee, this isn’t just about your promise.”

“What is it about, then? I love you, Kara, but I don’t understand why you’re doing this.”

The tall man is fiddling with something from his mom’s lab table. He holds it up and looks through the tube. The moment he sees Delta, his back straightens, making him even taller.

“You can come out, boy,” he says. He sounds nice, but it’s nice like an alphadon is nice when you have food, right before it bites you.

“Delta,” his mom sees him there. He thinks he’ll be in trouble. But her voice is her soft mom-voice. Her voice says, “It’s okay. Come on out. This is your aunt Karachi. And Reginal. They won’t hurt you.”

Her hands say something else. They ask *Idoya? Safe? Hidden?*

He steps forward into the room, touches his left cheek to say yes.

She visibly relaxes, an exhale that he sees more than hears. When she turns to face the others, her hands are clasped behind her back.

He wants to think about all of this. His aunt. Family. But he senses that his mom has more to say, that this is

important in ways he doesn't understand, so he focuses on watching her hands while not looking at her hands.

"Now all our cards are on the table," his mom says. "So why don't you tell me what's really going on? Why does SATI want Delta and I back so badly?"

"Oh, Phee," his aunt says, and it's like the words visibly pain her. "It's not about you or him."

The pause is so long he can feel it stretch, like rubber between his fingers. Outside, the microraptor calls, a haunting huntsound that pierces his heart.

"It's about her."

What little bit he can see of his mom's face goes grub-grey. She is silent. Her fingers flutter, but they're not making words that he knows.

"If I had a week or so to pack up, Delta and I could follow you, head to Kel—"

The tall man—his name suits him, Reginal—steps forward impatiently. "Did you really think they wouldn't know that the girl was still alive? Wouldn't do their research, didn't know as soon as you left that you were hiding something? For fuck's sake, Phee. You've always been incredibly stupid for someone so smart."

"She's not even your kid," Reginal says. He looks at Delta. His words are all meanteeth. "She's not even your real sister, kid. Just some test-tube grown experiment."

Delta thinks he might hate this man. At least that's what he thinks the heat in his heart is, burning for his mom. For Idoya. This isn't the herd he wanted.

"Enough, Reg," Kara says. Somewhere, her hand fell off away from his mom's arm. She doesn't try to put it back.

His mom doesn't say anything. He can tell she's thinking. This makes him feel calmer. A little. His mom

is the smartest person he knows. Not that he knows that many, but still.

“Why?” his mom says. The techtat scars along her face pull and twitch. “Kara...you’re my sister. Why?”

“There’s an asteroid coming, Phee. You can hide out and pretend it’s not, but it is. And the Butterflies are gaining ground every day against us. If we don’t stop them, they will kill us before the asteroid can.”

Then lower, a whisper like Idoya makes to the haddys. “You knew what she was. From the beginning. You weren’t supposed to fall in love with her.”

“Children should not be made as weapons,” his mom says. “That child out there should never have been made into what she was.”

The idea that Idoya’s a weapon would strike him as funny if he wasn’t so scared. She can barely talk, except to the haddys and the pterosaurs. She doesn’t even like to hurt the grubs that crawl through the walls and try to get in the food.

“We know,” his aunt says. “We stopped the program after you ran away. It wasn’t right. It’s not the worst thing SATI has done, god knows, but experimenting on children? That was too far, even for SATI.”

“You didn’t stop because you give a shit.” His mom is swearing in front of him and if Delta wasn’t already feeling panicked thunder in his chest he is now. “You stopped because all the others failed. Because they all *died*.”

“Except for her.”

“So you want to rip her from her home, from her family,” His mom’s voice is like when you eat berries before they’re ripe. “Turn her into a weapon for your own bullshit war.”

Reginal opens his mouth to speak. His aunt holds up her hand and falls silent. Her voice is soft and low. It's a direct message to his mom, even though they can all hear it. "She's already made, Phee. She is what she was made to be. You can't protect her from that."

Outside, the man's microraptor calls and calls. Delta hears the sound of a weapon and the haddys, stampeding and honking. He understands too late that this has all been a distraction. Him and his mom here, while the man with the raptor hunts Idoya out of her herd. Separate the weak. He wants to throw up. He left her there. *Can you stay here for five minutes? Like hide-and-peek? You and the haddys?*

She'd trusted him and said yes.

He has to do something. He looks to his mom for help. Delta doesn't think his mom is thinking anymore. He thinks she's stuck, unable to go forward or back. Her whole body is still. Even the scar keeps its weird-shaped smile. She teeters, catches herself against the lab table.

But as she does so, her fingers move. *When I say go, go. To Idoya. Delta, don't let her...* the word she uses is *hatch* but that doesn't make sense.

This too, has been a ploy, he thinks. Only his mom's this time. He and Idoya were supposed to be outside still. Hidden. She hadn't expected him to come inside. She's making a new plan.

Her fingers make the word for *love-protect-we'll do this together* at the same time she says, "Go." Her fingers hover over the alarm button under the table. Not the blue light one. The red light one. She pushes. The house thwumps with power, a vibration he feels in his bones.

Delta doesn't stay to see what happens. He has practiced this. They all have. When his mom pushes the button,

they have the count of one hundred to get out the front door. One hundred numbers before the house becomes explosion and dust. Even as he runs, he understands what he's leaving behind. It hurts him so hard he can't find the doorknob. Hurts so hard it's impossible to understand what he's seeing when he bursts through the front door and the man and the microraptor are there in the air.

Everything is shimmered and swept up, swirling like a time storm. The man and the raptor tumble through the air, faster and faster. The man cries out. White-eyed. Terrified. They get faster and faster as he watches.

In the very center of it, the only thing on the ground, is Idoya. Her hands are raised. She's singing. "Storm coming, storm coming, everybody's running, everybody's running."

Behind her, the haddys, stand quietly in a half-circle. Calm as they always are around her.

Delta doesn't understand what he's seeing, but he understands that doesn't matter. Everything he's ever been or ever will be is tied into this moment. He doesn't have to understand. He just has to choose.

She's not even your real sister, kid.

Delta, don't let her hatch.

Behind him, the house makes the sound of a far-off volcano, except it's so close he can feel the heat up his back. It knocks him to his knees. Everything in him is hot wet cinders and ash. He looks up, watches the man and the creature swirl overhead.

Idoya looks at him. Clear and strong. With the eyes and the voice of an Idoya he hasn't met yet, she says, "They tried to hurt us."

"Idoya," he says. His voice is deep and low, and it carries across to her. He can see by the way she squints her eyes at him. "Tell me the haddys' names."

She is silent. Then. “Ama. Bal. Cinder.”

By the time she gets to “Zin,” she is crying. He is too. She brings the living things down to earth, soft as petals crushed underfoot. He doesn’t think the man is dead. But he seems stunned. The microraptor takes to the sky instantly, calling out.

The haddys make a close circle with their bodies. Necks entwined. Eyes to the sky. They keep Zin and Idoya and Delta in their center. They coo softly, a song of safety.

Idoya runs to him, signing over and over *sorry sorry sorry*.

Delta doesn’t know how to carry this weapon that looks like his sister. He is not prepared for this.

Or maybe he is. As she comes closer, he opens his arms and takes her in.