

PROLOGUE

BIRD-BEAST

It is a hot summer's day on the pampas of central Ancòn some twenty kloms inland from the briny sea. A herd of small, horse-like animals are grazing peacefully in the warm sun. None of the animals are aware of the vigilant creature lurking fifty meters away in the tall grass. This creature — the female of the species — is an aggressive hunter. She is presently hidden from view by the lush vegetation that blankets the lower elevations.

The she-hunter is a carnivore, one that resembles a giant, oversized parrot, though much more dangerous. It is equipped with a trim, feathered body, a pair of reptilian eyes, and a massive beak she uses to gulp down huge swaths of flesh. The eyes are set far apart on opposite sides of her disproportionately large head. They remain fixed at all times on the grazing herd.

The creature's immense head sits atop a long and powerful neck. The head swings from side to side in rapid jerks. This is a reflex habit. It permits the predator to keep a fix on her prey, even without benefit of stereoscopic vision.

Before long the head drops down to the level of the grass. The creature edges forward. But, after several meters, she seems to change her mind. She stops, again raises her oversized head and renews her surveillance. With cold, reptilian eyes the female bird-beast scans the herd for any sign that she has been spotted. Seeing none, she puts her head back down again and advances further. At a distance of perhaps thirty meters, the carnivore is ready to strike.

The creature scratches at the ground, now, with her claw. She lowers her head to a large rock close by her feet. Then she rubs her cavernous snout against the boulder. This is instinctual behavior. Such rubbing sharpens the beak's bladeliike edges and completes her preparations for the impending attack. Back and forth it goes, until the edges are razor sharp.

Now the terrible bird-like beast bristles her short feathers and springs from the tall grass. She dashes forward toward the herd at high speed propelled by a pair of long, muscular legs. Within seconds, she is bearing down on her prey at close to seventy kloms per hour. Her small wings, useless for flight, are extended out to the sides for balance and maneuverability.

Stricken with fright, the herd bolts in disarray as the predator bears down upon them. Undeterred, the attacker fixes her attention on an old male. He is lagging behind the rest of the fleeing animals. Although the old male is running desperately fast to escape annihilation, the she-beast quickly gains on him. *Only moments later, she is at his side.*

Now, with a stunning sideswipe of her powerful left foot, the attacker knocks her prey off balance. She seizes the fallen male in her massive beak, beats the hapless animal against the ground with repeated swinging motions of her giant head. All too quickly the victim succumbs and the attacker swallows the limp body whole. It is an impressive feat, even when one considers the bird-beast's meter-long head and half-meter-wide gape of her beak.

With stomach bulging, the gorged predator lumbers slowly back to her round nest of twigs in the nearby grass, where she resumes incubating her eggs. There are two eggs in the nest, each roughly the size of a basketball.

She squats down upon the eggs and, like a good mother, grunts with satisfaction. Something approaching a contented smile erupts on her giant, parrotlike face.