



Marie Golien

# Cainstorm Island

## The Hunted (Part 1)

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### Outline

#### **You can't escape them**

Emilio lives on Cainstorm Island, which is destabilized by overpopulation, poverty, and violence. One day, Eyevision - a company from wealthy, high-tech Asaria - offers to implant a chip inside his head. This chip will be attached to his optic nerve, and for 30 minutes a day, everything that Emilio sees will be sent directly to his video stream. His videos of daring climbing and train surfing activities will be streamed to the Asarians, and the more reckless the stunts, the more viewers he will win. But then Emilio ends up in a gang-dominated area, where he kills one of the leaders in self-defense. Live on the air. The video goes viral, and Emilio becomes the hunted - a heart-pounding chase through the slums of a megacity ensues, as millions of viewers watch.

- **A dystopian action thriller for adrenalin-junkies**
- **For readers of Dave Eggers, Ursula Poznanski and James Dashner**

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Sample translation

by Gesche Ipsen & Stephanie Forryan

1

I crouch in front of the crooked wooden cross with the dried flowers. The cross has only been here for two days, and for a moment I feel uneasy at the thought of exploiting this tragic story. But then, the ice cream man is dead, right? What does he care? So I let my eyes wander over to the red spots that cover the floor like rust stains. Someone has tried to clean up the blood, but ended up only making it worse. Now the sun has baked the stains into the tarmac. I raise my eyes. I scan the wall of the house.

‘See those massive holes? They shot him at close range!’

A woman crouching somewhere next to me gives me a curious look. ‘Who are you talking to, boy?’

I’d hoped that she would ignore me. But it’s not my fault that she’s decided to sit right where the murder happened. I ignore her. The cross is being held together by tightly knotted neon-yellow shoelaces. Out loud, I read: ‘Fernando, we’ll meet again! Rest in peace!’

If you look closely, you can see small brown dots on the glaring neon yellow. My viewers like such details. I let my gaze return to the wall. A spray-painted black snake is staring down at me. Jaws open wide, needle-sharp teeth, an evil, slightly mad glint in its eyes. It looks ready to lunge. A chill runs down my spine, even though I know the snake is only graffiti. As conspiratorially as possible, I whisper: ‘When the “Las Culebras” execute someone, they leave their mark near the corpse. It’s a warning to the rest of us.’

The woman is digging around in the holes on the bottom of her shoe with a little stick. She looks at me, amused. ‘Are there people here I can’t see, Sherlock?’

She’s sitting on a threadbare cloth, on which she’s heaped the electronic waste she’s flogging: broken monitors, a yellowed keyboard, and PCs with cables dangling from them. A few stray dogs are dozing nearby, and a child with a hawkers’ tray is walking down the street shimmering in the heat. There’s no one around. The leaden afternoon heat has conquered the city and driven most people indoors. There’s nothing noticeably odd about me on the outside, and I’m obviously not going to tell her about the people who are with us right now, watching and listening. Let her think I’m a lunatic. Voices in my head. A psychiatric case. Anyway, I don’t have time for explanations.

I shrug. ‘I just sometimes think out loud.’

My viewers aren’t interested in the woman, who is now raising her eyebrows as if to say, ‘I don’t believe a word of it.’

*Who was the victim? Why was he shot dead?*

That’s what they want to know. They love a good murder. I’ve got to know them pretty well by now. On a boring Thursday afternoon, they’re nothing they like better than a few blood-soaked stories. Real drama, at a safe distance. Little hearts and inscriptions have been scribbled on the stained ground, around the cross. With a practiced slowness, I let my eyes wander over them. I’d bought ice cream from the murdered man a few times. Coloured water. Nice guy, but high as a kite, his pupils as big as coins. I can imagine how it went down with the Las Culebras: debts, promises, cravings, threats, and in the end a sordid death, right by his ice-cream stand. But that’s much too boring. I make something up.

‘He was called Fernando, and he was in love with a girl who was a member of the Las Culebras gang.’

The woman by the wall now sceptically raises her eyebrows, until they nearly touch her hair. ‘Are you for real?’ she asks.

‘It was a secret. Nobody knew.’

I don’t give her time to react to my lies, but cross the narrow street and start scaling a solid-looking drainpipe, as I continue my fiction: ‘Fernando was in a different gang, and the snakes obviously couldn’t accept that he was going out with one of them. So they lured him into an ambush here and shot him dead. When his girlfriend heard about it, she flipped out. She packed her car with every weapon she could find. A machine gun, knives. Even hand grenades. She drove to the Las Culebras HQ with them, and shot as many of the snakes as she could find. Her own people! Then she threw herself into the ocean.’

*OMG. Sad and romantic. Like in the movies,* one of the users writes. Others send legions of weeping cat emojis.

I’m pleased they’ve bought my story. I pull myself onto the roof and wipe the sweat from my forehead. Then I look down and into the shocked face of the woman sitting among her electronic waste. That lunatics climb drainpipes is news to her.

My viewers comment, maliciously: *Now grow a pair of wings, that’ll do her head in.*

I start running. The sheets of corrugated iron under my feet bend and bounce back with a thundering hum. The edge of the roof is coming towards me. The chasm is wider than I remember, and I pick up speed. I push off with everything I have, and jump across. The children playing below blur into colourful dots. I grab the gutter of the next house and my trainers hit the wall unexpectedly hard. The gutter groans indignantly, as if I’d rudely awakened it from its siesta, and the edges cut painfully into my fingers. I pray that it can hold my weight.

Horrified emojis, with wide-open eyes and mouths, flicker before my inner eye. *Oh no, don’t fall! You’ll be dead meat!* Then more little pictures, of skulls and something that looks like an exploded jellyfish.

I clench my jaws, pull myself up and roll away from the edge.

‘Don’t worry, the hospital isn’t on my to-do list today!’

My viewers love danger as much as they love stories about murder. At least, they love it when I'm in danger and they can watch it all unfold through my eyes. Making up stories isn't my only talent; I'm an excellent climber and jumper too. Lying may not be one of my more virtuous qualities, but when you grow up among thieves, murderers and creatures who only crawl out of their holes at night, sometimes it's the only way to survive. As long as you remember which lie you've told whom. I've been climbing things since I was a kid. I love scaling the steep walls of buildings, and leaping from roof to roof. Everything for a shot of adrenaline. And if I get paid for it, all the better.

A shaggy cat has been sleeping in the sun. Startled by my noisy arrival, it makes off with an angry hiss. The tall buildings above me cast their shadows across the small back yard.

'Okay, so are you up for something *really* dangerous?'

*Oh yeah!* Laughing cats, holding tubs of popcorn. *We're up for it!*

In the distance I hear a shrill, siren-like warning signal, which reverberates in the narrow streets, multiplying a thousandfold.

'Then get ready for the most incredible, dangerous and breathtaking train ride ever!'

I clamber over burst-open rubbish bags. The yard is dilapidated. Black shadows scurry off.

*Eugh! Rats?* I read.

'Yep, they're everywhere! There are so many that you can't even smoke a fag without one of them coming up asking for a drag. But the stench is even worse! Be glad that you can't smell it.' I pull my jumper over my nose and explain: 'The rubbish trucks don't come this way. People either have to take the rubbish away themselves, or leave it lying around in the yards and on the roofs, rotting away.'

*What's that in the corner? Please take a look!!* someone writes.

I turn round and see two figures lying curled up on grey cardboard. Their rugs are as stained and tattered as the ground. Suitcases tied up with rope are piled up in a corner. A tiny child is sitting next to them, not moving. It's two years old, maybe. It watches me, digging its grubby little fists into the dirt. The comments hurtle past my inner eye so quickly that I can hardly read them:

*The poor kid, OMG that's awful!*

*It's disgusting, the squalor in which you guys live. Unbelievable.*

I get the same reaction whenever I see a particularly scruffy kid or mangy dog. For me, these images belong so much to the city that barely used to notice them. But my viewers don't come from here. They live across the sea, on a continent called Asaria. I've since learnt that they have no strays there, human or animal.

I blink once, long enough to wipe the comments and sad emojis from my field of vision, so that I can see where I'm going.

'Unfortunately I don't have anything to give the child,' I say, regretfully, and look up at the square buildings, stacked one on top of one another like messy shoeboxes. Bay windows and balconies jut out as if someone had randomly stuck them on. Everyone builds their houses how and

where they want. You can normally only reach the ones at the top via the many flights of small steps winding their way through the labyrinth of houses. That’s where my city, Milescaleras, gets its name from: the city of a thousand steps.

I swing myself onto a projecting edge and work my way up the wall. I push my toes into a crevice, half an inch wide, and pull myself up by a windowsill. I hear the train’s howling whistle again, in the distance.

To keep the heat out, people drape their windows with curtains or nail them shut with planks, so I’m climbing almost unobserved by anyone. Most people don’t care that I use their houses as a parkour route. They regard it as a private circus act, and bet with their neighbours on whether I’ll crash to the ground. Nobody’s ever got really mad at me so far, but I don’t want to take unnecessary risks and try to stay out of sight.

Halfway up, the smell of burning bacon fills my nostrils, and through a window I can see a fat man standing at the stove, his back to me. There’s an iron grille over the window, but the bars are far enough apart to put your arm through.

‘Shall I?’ I whisper, an open tin of pineapple rings in my line of sight, and switch the comments field back on with a slow blink.

*Yeeeah! Do it!*

The man’s frying pan is fizzling so loudly that he doesn’t notice a thing. I quickly pull the tin through the bars and make off with it. It takes thirty seconds to get back down the wall. My viewers don’t really like seeing me take the same route twice. When they get bored they switch off straightaway. That’s how easy it is for them.

The little girl hasn’t moved. I assume that the two figures on the ground are her parents, lying asleep and motionless on the cardboard. I cautiously approach the girl, like a timid animal you don’t want to startle. Wide-eyed, she takes the tin from my hands, but then just stares at it.

‘You can eat it,’ I tell her, and perform a slow, exaggerated pantomime to show her how. She carefully fishes out a pineapple ring. Apparently she likes it, because from one moment to the next she’s forgotten all about me. When I see the hunger in her eyes, a pang hits me, and for a moment I can see myself in her place. My viewers send snivelling cats with tears in their eyes.

When I reach the highest point in the neighbourhood, I check the number of viewers in the corner above the comments field. When I was at Fernando’s cross there were 109 – my first three-digit number. Now it’s 112. Good. I have just under fifteen minutes before my programme automatically ends.

The afternoon sun is shining in the blue sky, and a light wind is blowing in from the sea.

I stop at the edge of the roof and look across the sea of houses. The tracks are right below me, close to the wall of the house. A few miles away I can see the train appear and disappear between two houses. There’s a little time left.

*We want a picture of you, ECOO! Go look into a mirror, pleeeeee!* Wood Sprite writes, followed by a flood of little hearts.

I’ve already uploaded a profile picture of me, but in that one I’m doing a somersault. You can’t tell much from it, except maybe that I’m dark-haired and athletic. Otherwise, the viewers can only see what I’m seeing. My gloved hands as I climb, my grey hoodie, jeans and trainers. My name isn’t ECOO, either, but Emilio. It probably doesn’t matter what my viewers know about me. They live so far away that we won’t ever meet. But my mother’s husband sees things differently. In his opinion, every time I broadcast I’m selling a piece of my soul. Every day, he becomes more incensed by the fact that I work for Eyevision.

‘Sorry, but there’s no mirror here. But for that I can give you the best view of Milescaleras there is.’

No matter in which direction I turn, every inch of land is built up, all the way to the horizon. To the right of the city is the ocean, dark and peaceful. At school we learnt that there are another thirty-nine cities crowded together on our continent. But they say it isn’t worth going there, because they’re just as overcrowded and deprived as Milescaleras.

*What are those holes?* asks Dan. Next to us, far below, there’s a crater that looks like a meteorite has hit the city. It too is packed with houses. Narrow steps lead down into a twilight of corrugated-iron roofs and chimneys.

‘The government’s digging everywhere for raw materials. The craters are former pits. They don’t fill them back in when they’re done. When the diggers and cranes have gone, people build their houses in the holes and on the mountains of rubble. The poorest live at the very bottom. When it rains hard, they fill with water and toxic mud. Then people drown, or are buried alive by mudslides. We’re going to take a ride down there on the train shortly.’

*Looks like it leads to the underworld. Where’s your place?*

I actually live neither on one of the mountains nor in a gloomy hole. The neighbourhood I come from was built on stilts over the beach, and sticks out a bit into the sea. I think my family’s been lucky, even though the water sometimes rises so high that our flat is flooded. I point to somewhere vague in the distance. ‘Over there, on that mountain.’

*What about the little homeless girl? Can’t the state help her? Someone has to be responsible for her!*

I snort: ‘The state doesn’t do anything here. Least of all for the homeless.’ Anyway, it never helped my mother and me, when we had to live on the streets. That time is long gone, but I can still clearly remember the wrecked with the split seats and broken windows, and the wind sweeping through it.

*I don’t get how you can live like this. I mean, it’s so cramped and everything. How many people live there? 25 million? 35 million? I’d find it too claustrophobic,* writes a certain King James, and someone else adds: *Why don’t you do something to improve things? You could start by clearing up all that rubbish in the street!*

The Asarians sometimes get on my nerves. Until recently, I had no idea what it’s like over there, in Asaria. The government usually doesn’t disclose any information about it, probably so that

we in this dirty, overpopulated city don't become envious. But then, four months ago, I started working for the Asarian company Eyevision. I film things through my eyes, and the video is automatically uploaded to my channel. People can watch live and comment on it, or watch the recorded footage later. For each viewer I get a few cents. The more viewers, the better.

As a welcome present, Eyevision gave me a small, glowing red sphere, which they call Eynet. I can plug the sphere straight into my laptop, and that way I'm indirectly connected to Asaria: through Eynet, I can not only access my own videos, but watch the ones made by people filming through their eyes in Asaria.

When I saw the first videos from over there, it seemed to me like I was receiving radio signals from a distant dimension. A parallel universe, a million light years away. But Asaria is just 75 miles from our coastline.

But the world over there is completely different: skyscrapers made of glass which rotate with the sun, like plants, villas and castles, parks with shrubs that almost collapse under the weight of their flowers, waterfalls, and deep woods with strange animals. Women and men with huge hats and fans, sitting on curved chairs drinking espresso from tiny little cups. Shiny cars that seem to float above the tarmac. Carriages drawn by giant horses. Streets so clean you could eat off them.

I've spent nights watching those videos and trying to decipher the Asarians, like an explorer watching an alien culture that he'll never be able to understand. What I *can* say is, that they're basically just like us, only with more money in their pockets. Most of the videos show people going shopping, doing fancy sports or sitting in expensive restaurants ordering sea snails, caviar and ice cream covered in gold dust.

Over there, a street urchin would stick out like a sore thumb, the way a pink seagull would here. Their world is as foreign and fascinating to me like the misery and murders in mine are to them. With the one difference that I would go over there in a heartbeat if I could, but doubt that any of them would want to visit me.

'Where are we supposed to put the rubbish? And what can we do about the congestion? You can see that we've even started building into the sea, because there's so little room,' I reply, somewhat testily.

*Zarbon21, you're an arse. ECOO, when the government tears down your house because they're looking for raw materials, you're welcome to come to Asaria and live with me, Wood Sprite offers.*

'Thanks, but I'd be bringing my family with me.'

*No problem, my parents' house is big enough.*

Another user interjects: *Aren't people from your province banned from coming to Asaria? I think we even have barbed wire and machine guns at the border, in case someone tries crossing in a boat.*

*Oh man, I only meant it hypothetically,* writes Wood Sprite, and sends a few cats with rolling eyes.

'Don't say call it a province. My continent's called Cairnstorm,' I reply.

At that moment, I feel a vibration under my feet and hear the drawn-out sound of the siren. With a long blink I make the comments disappear.

I stand at the edge of the roof, ready to leap. The tracks run past the house about three yards below me. When the train comes I'll be able to jump onto it from here.

The train struggles up the incline, puffing hard. Its dull, worn-out metal reflects the afternoon sun. When it reaches the top, it seems to need to catch its breath, the air escaping from the vents with a whistle. It's the moment I've been waiting for. I jump on the roof, and hug one of the hot metal chimney stacks. The train gasps for air with a screech and plummets down the slope. Air rushes in my ears and squeezes the breath from my lungs.

Although my eyes are tearing up in the headwind, I try to keep them open so that I can provide my viewers with decent images. Houses, bridges, streets fly past me right and left, lengthened into multicoloured streaks. Down we go. Down into the crater. Adrenaline and a wild feeling of elation explode in my veins. At that moment, I don't care about anything else. Money troubles, neon-yellow shoelaces with bloodstains, and cobra-graffiti are left behind and evaporate into insignificance.

When we've arrived at the bottom of the slope, the train races through narrow, twisting streets. In the canyons, the shrill, siren-like whistle and rattling wheels echo between houses. Pedestrians jump out of the way and drivers brake abruptly. The brakes shriek reluctantly. Sparks fly up, and the train slows down as the first stop approaches. Although 'stop' isn't quite the right word. The people stand at the edge of the platform, ready to jump on, their faces taut. The train brakes, but doesn't stop. People run alongside it and try to grab the doors, to pull themselves into the carriages. If you're too slow, you're left behind. I don't want to know how many people have broken their bones getting on and off. The train speeds up, pumping along. The ground seems to give way beneath us, we tilt forward and dive into the throat of a tunnel. The roar of the train is thrown back by the walls, and the airstream grows into a hurricane that nearly sweeps me off the roof.

Those last few yards have cost me all my energy, and I'm glad that it's nearly 5 p.m. That's when Eyevision automatically switches off. On the other side of the tunnel the train huffs and puffs and gradually slows. Happy with myself and how the last half hour has gone, I jump from the roof and land on an overgrown balcony.

The light is dim, it seems as if it's much later in the day. Down here in the crater it always seems to me like the sounds are muffled, as if the foggy gloom swallows them up. The houses rise above me, stuck to the crater's walls. Millions of minute water drops cling to the windows and balcony railings. The blue sky is far away.

'Now we're in one of the holes. You can't feel it, but it's definitely five degrees colder down here.'

The tall windows have been painted black on the inside, so I don't have to worry about anyone seeing me. Nevertheless, I wonder who lives here. The building looks abandoned. Rubbish and rotting leaves have created a dark crust on the tiles, and plants are growing through the cracks. But there aren't really any empty houses here, there's too great a shortage of living space. I can't see any graffiti, either, which might mark this place out as gang territory. Maybe it's a warehouse? I

follow the balcony that runs all the way round the house. The past half-hour was pretty tough. I could walk down a flight of steps for a change, instead of climbing. With a blink, the comments appears behind my eyes. I now have 118 viewers. I’m getting better and better.

*That was the most epic rollercoaster ride of my life!* one user has written.

Another, full of glee: *My sister nearly threw up on the bends.*

*Why doesn’t the train stop at the stations?* asks Zarbon21.

‘The trains don’t even have drivers. They just go on and on. Even when there’s an accident or something, they never stop.’

I round the corner of the balcony and look down from the first floor into a dim courtyard surrounded by tall brick buildings. Wild ferns and a thick layer of moss cover the concrete floor. A massive chimney rises above everything. Maybe I should climb it? The houses stare at me out of their dead black eyes. Muted street noises can be heard in the distance, otherwise it’s weirdly quiet. Too quiet. I notice a movement in the corner of my eyes. One of the doors has opened, and a figure glides out noiselessly, like a ghost. The girl freezes when she sees me. She stares at me with a hunted look in her eyes. Warning me. Don’t come near me. Dumbstruck by her sudden appearance, I scrutinise her. Her eyes are unnaturally light. But I’m spellbound not just by her eyes, but by her snow-white skin. It’s almost like a vampire’s. Doesn’t she ever go out in the sun? She’s wearing tight, frayed jeans and a black T-Shirt that shows off her tattooed arms. She’s roughly my age. Maybe older. Eighteen or nineteen. I realise, embarrassed, that I’m staring at her. I quickly raise my hands to show that I’m unarmed. She throws me a hostile, almost hateful, look, then runs light-footed over to the railing. She pauses there for a second and regards me with a frown, as if trying to size me up. I notice a metal plate, about five inches big, which seems to be anchored into her wrist, above her pulse. Jewellery?

‘Hey, what—’ I start saying, but there’s a wheezing sound and I spin round. A pit bull darts through one of the doors, crashes past me goes for the girl’s leg. Quick as lightning, I step on the leash dragging along behind it, yank the dog back and tie the leather strap around a pillar. The dog whips round, barking furiously at me, but I’m faster and leap out of reach; its teeth snap nothing but air. The girl has swung a leg over the railing. Her lips shape just one word: ‘Run!’ Then she jumps off and lands in the thick moss down in the yard. She gets up and disappears round the corner.

A second later, the door is pushed open again. This time there’s an irate bellowing. A man rushes at me. Instinctively, I block his fist and retreat to the wall. He grunts and waves a knife in front of my face.

‘Where is she?’ My eyes stare at the razor-sharp blade, as if hypnotised. ‘Has she gone to the tracks? Huh?’

He’s too close. I can’t run away. If I try, he’ll plunge that knife into my back. So I put on my ‘touch me and I’ll knock your teeth out’ face and stare directly into his eyes...

And freeze.

Emblazoned on his forehead is a snake with gaping jaws. Poison is dripping from its teeth. I don’t have to read the words ‘Las Culebras’ tattooed across his neck to know who he is or to whom

he belongs. The little wooden cross with the dried flowers pushes itself into my thoughts like an omen. He’s one of the guys who have the ice-cream man Fernando’s death on their conscience.

‘She went across the tracks,’ I reply, to gain time.

The mutt howls and pulls at its leash, and Snakehead spits on the ground. ‘You’re lying.’

He’s more muscular than I am, maybe in his mid-twenties, but I’m taller. I can tell from his movements that he isn’t concentrating. He’s almost manic. If it wasn’t for the knife, I might even have a chance. I’m unarmed. Las Culebras don’t allow us to carry weapons. When they catch someone who doesn’t belong to the gang carrying a knife, they punish them.

‘She ran past me, towards the tracks. Why would I lie?’

He carves up the air in front of my face, shifts from one leg to the other and wipes his face with his free hand, as if he can’t stand still for even a second. I can smell his aftershave. Bananas. It’s so pungent that it almost covers up the reeking mixture of sour breath, alcohol, smoke and unwashed clothes.

‘Because you’re her friend! Why else would you be here?’

‘I’ve never seen her before.’

‘Yeah, sure,’ he sneers. ‘How did you get in, anyway?’

‘Across the tracks. There was no sign saying that this is your place.’

‘There was no sign saying that you could come in here either, was there?’

He grins broadly, revealing missing incisors. He frenziedly lunges at me with his knife. I dodge him, my back to the wall, the blade grazes my arm and cuts into my skin through my jumper. My heart is racing. I’ve been in lots of fights, but never with someone who had a knife.

Snakehead is deadly serious. I can see it in his eyes. He wants to kill me and he’ll have fun doing it. He attacks again and tries to ram the knife into my side. Again, I block him with my arm, and I feel his knife slashing me. My sleeves are shredded. Blood drips onto the floor, and I clench my fists. But he just keeps grinning his gappy grin.

‘Chalky’s left you here to die, has she?’ His eyes are tunnels of madness, his pupils like pinheads, his face a mask of anticipation and bloodlust. He comes so close to me that I can almost taste his disgusting banana aftershave. ‘Death smells of bananas,’ flashes through my mind. He slowly raises the knife, as if contemplating where to stick it next. An ice-cold calm comes over me, and in the back of my head a quiet voice whispers insistently: ‘If you don’t do something, you’re dead.’

I block the knife and ram my fist into his chin. He stumbles back, pulling me with him, and we crash into the rotten wooden railing. It creaks and cracks, and splinters fly through the air. I plummet into the yard and land in the soft, damp moss, roll away and start running, but Snakehead is on top of me and pulls me back down. Something hard digs into my back. The knife. I’m lying on the knife. He must have lost it when he fell. Snakehead is lying on top of me, his face twisted with rage, pinning me down with the weight of his body. He roars and raises his fist. Desperately, I fend the punch off with one hand, while I scramble around with the other, feeling for the knife

underneath me. I hear a loud, hysterical yapping above us. The mutt is gaping through the splintered balcony railing. Snakehead bends over me, one hand closing around my throat like iron, and with the other he throws another punch, and this time he gets me. Shocked cat emojis are dancing in front of my eyes and I lose my bearings. Text races past my inner eye and I foggily realise that I’ve accidentally activated the chat function. My fingers touch the knife, and I try to grab it and pull it out from under me. Snakehead doesn’t notice. Hissing furiously, he now puts both hands around my throat and slowly squeezes. My vision becomes blurred, and Snakehead laughs, soundlessly. Not a sound escapes his lips, and he shivers like he’s having the time of his life. The snake grins at me, expectantly, and with my last ounce of energy I rear up and pull my arm out. Red clouds explode before my eyes. I ram the knife into Snakehead’s side.

Blood pours from his mouth and drips onto my face. He looks down at me, surprised. His grip finally loosens. His hands sink to the ground and I push him off me. He goes limp and topples over. I roll away and leap to my feet. He tries to take a breath, but now he’s the one gasping for air. His lungs emit a deep, horrible bubbling sound.

‘You idiot... Mordaz... Mordaz...’ His voice is an angry, hissing whisper. ‘He’ll rip you to pieces.’

A foamy cough. His hand forms into a kind of C. A snake with gaping jaws. He turns onto his back, twitching, and I can’t tell whether it’s a spasm or silent laughter that’s shaking him. With an odd, almost mechanical flutter, his eyes close and the snake on his forehead stares at me, full of hate. Heavy breathing, then silence. Blood runs into the moss, where it mingles with drops of water. A tiny frog hops out of the wild fern and gazes on the bloody scene, indifferent.

I step back and look at my hands. My mind is a blank. My clothes, my arms, my hands, everything’s soaked in blood. I have killed someone. I wince, horrified, and a woman’s friendly voice sounds in my head: ‘The time is 5 p.m. Thank you for using Eyevision. Eyevision will now shut down.’

No, I correct myself. Not just someone. A member of the Las Culebras. Live on air.