

4th Edition



# NERF TUARING

Rise of the Hackers

J. Padilla

 SAMARCANDA



# NARRATIVE TRAINING

Rise of the Hackers

J. Padilla

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**Rise of the Hackers**

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## Chapter 1

# THE SIGN

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“I need your help.”

Mara Turing jumped and quickly pulled her headphones off. They dropped on a pile of papers full of doodles and geometric shapes. The voice that had just interrupted her favorite song sounded familiar, but she wasn't sure why. How did it end up in her music? For a second, she thought one of her classmates pulled a prank on her, but those bullies didn't have the brainpower for something so sophisticated.

She quickly collected herself and tried to pretend nothing weird had just happened, sliding the headphones back onto her head. It wasn't the best time to make Ms. Wright angry again for being noisy. Mara had been punished several times that trimester for disrupting classes. One more strike and she'd need a new hand to keep writing “I will not speak in Music class” over and over again.

“Who are you?” she whispered, her mouth pressed against the microphone on her headset while glancing over at the teacher's desk.

No answer.

Suddenly, the song began to play from where it had been cut off a minute before. Mara continued with the little schoolwork she had left. It was mid-June, and she had finished all of her exams, but the hours still seemed endless in the Saint Michael classroom, a school located on the outskirts of Liverpool. Even without the bullies giving her a hard time.

The two leaders of that group of punks, Nick Jordan and Tom Balzary, seemed to have calmed down once summer began. They were now completely separated, one on each side

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of the classroom. The school year had been a nightmare for anyone who wasn't part of their crew: Salamander Squad, as they liked to call themselves. The Salamander Squad started fights, picked on other kids, stole things here and there, and even tried alcohol and tobacco.

The most veteran teachers in the school weren't surprised. There are always bullies. But what made these specific two boys stand out was that they had their own video channel, and this year they had livestreamed some of their "performances" to their thousands of followers. The most viewed video was when they surprised Martha Winklewood (or "Year Seven Sissy", as they called her in the video) by hanging a dead bat in her locker.

Mara had been luckier. Everything Jordan, Balzary, and the others in the gang had done to her hadn't been caught on camera or live streamed. It was a relief knowing there weren't any videos of her trapped in the shower after gym class because someone had stolen her clothes. Not because it would be embarrassing, but because she wanted to keep her mother from knowing all the things that were going on in her school. Mara's mother, Sandra, had enough on her plate by having to raise Mara on her own.

Some of the teachers also had leading roles in a few videos, unbeknownst to them, since they were recorded without consent. Nick and Tom would dub the videos to make fun of them. One of their favorite teacher videos was of Hemenegilda Wright. Even though she had heard rumors of the video from teacher meetings every Friday, Ms. Wright didn't give a flying frog about technology and didn't want to know anything more than she already did.

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She was one of those teachers who forced her students to spend hours working with pen and paper. “Let your imagination guide you!” she’d say in her loud voice, arms up in the air as if she were about to take off in flight, testing the limits of her cardigan’s buttons... and her students’ eardrums. No devices were allowed in class except for those provided by the school, and which had previously gone through administrative approval.

Ms. Wright had grown up in Ipswich, United Kingdom, in a family which valued discipline very much. She had studied Spanish Philology at Suffolk University in the late 80s, so battery-powered devices and the Internet had caught her a bit off-guard. She wasn’t fond of integrating those “things” into people’s daily lives. “What can be better than a record player’s needle touching Debussy’s Clair de Lune vinyl? That masterpiece doesn’t need to be put into one of those MP3s things,” she’d say to whoever pointed out her obvious rejection of new technologies.

Rumor had it that she didn’t own a mobile phone or have internet connection at home, although that was something hard to believe in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Bob Morris, class representative, had tried to look up information on her online but found absolutely nothing.

Mara was in her first year of Secondary School and was a year ahead, which didn’t exactly help with her popularity in school. She was seen as the tiny know-it-all that got all the questions right in “Wormgilda” Wright’s class. And in Math, Physics, and all the others. “Know-it-all” might have been accurate, but tiny? She was as much of a preteen as the rest of

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her class, maybe only a few months younger than the kids who messed with her or talked behind her back. So, running into any Salamander in the hall on her own always led to disaster. And, although she was good at hiding it, this situation just added to the stress she had been dealing with for the past couple of trimesters.

After recovering from the initial state of shock the mysterious voice had left her in, Mara got up and went to the shelf to get one of the tablets the school provided for students. More specifically, the one she had customized behind her mother's back. She liked to call it her "boring class survival device." It had games, access to social media networks, videos... everything the average kid liked.

She plugged in her headset so nobody would hear the familiar sound effect of a swoosh when multicolored birds flew off the slingshot. Ms. Wright also had a "No playing around with gadgets in class" policy, so it was best not to try your luck.

After opening the folder and clicking on the game icon, Mara frowned. The game looked different. She'd just looked to see if it was a new version, when it happened again.

"I need you to help me, Mara."

The message appeared on the screen, but blended into the letters of the game title. Mara blinked in surprise, then held her breath for a few seconds. She glanced side to side, trying not to move her head too much. She didn't want to draw any attention toward her.

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After pressing “Continue”, the screen turned black. It blinked a couple of times and then showed the picture of a man who seemed very familiar. She knew why after reading the next message:

“I’m your uncle, Arnold Turing. I need you to help me.”

Mara turned pale. Her eyes got watery and her hands and lips began to shake. Her stomach clenched as her heart started pounding. It can’t be him. He’s been dead for years! she thought. She dropped the tablet on the desk, locked it and rushed to the door.

The rest of her classmates kept drawing, letting time just fly by. It was a quarter to two and the bell was about to ring.

Trembling, Mara ran down the hallway until she reached the girl’s bathroom. As she got to the door, she slipped on a wet tile. Grabbing the edge of the sink she caught herself, keeping her day from being ruined a little bit more, thanks to the cleaning lady of Saint Michael’s who had just mopped the floor.

“Uncle Arnold is dead. He’s no longer here, okay? Someone’s messing with you and you have to find out who it is,” she whispered to the mirror. The running faucet water drowned out her shaky voice.

She splashed her face, rubbing it frantically as she tried to remove her tears, then tore a long piece of toilet paper to blow her nose. Staring into the mirror, she firmly pulled down on her hoodie for the finishing touch.

Taking a deep breath, Mara grabbed onto the sink with both hands, swallowed and searched her reflection. There had to

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be an explanation for what had just happened. Uncle Arnold. His name took her back to when she was 5 years old...

Her dad had passed away before she was born, for reasons she didn't know. It's not that she didn't ask, but her uncle Arnold Turing, and her mother Sandra Hopper (who kept her maiden name after marrying Mara's dad, Lucas Turing) would always avoid a straight answer. "You wouldn't understand, honey," was a repeating phrase. The fact that they would always stroke her red hair in a seemingly patronizing way after saying that made her feel dumb. Everyone had always told her how smart she was since she was a little kid. So why would they think she couldn't understand?

Despite that one mystery, her childhood had been pretty joyful. Lots of games, lots of learning, but not many electronic devices. Close to none, actually.

"Don't touch that phone, Mara."

"Get away from that gadget, Mara."

"Stop playing Snake on that Nokia, Mara."

She had always used computers and phones or played video games in secrecy. "Some girls hide to smoke, some guys hide so they can see pictures of naked women... and I hide to play a game about moving multicolored diamonds. Seems pretty normal," she would say to her friends with a shrug.

However, Sandra and Arnold made sure that her "defect", which is what she now called it, didn't affect her having fun. Mara had also admitted, despite not being happy about it as a child, that all that drawing, coloring, and reading really helped

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her be a sharp child. She absorbed knowledge like a sponge, so her mom and uncle tried to make the most of it by teaching her things that would eventually be useful later in life.

Uncle Arnold tested his niece's intellect whenever he had the chance. If they were riding the metro, he would help her memorize all the stops. If they had a newspaper, he'd challenge her to memorize the TV programming for the day. Movie dialogue? Mara was also great at memorizing those! Every Sunday morning, they would go to one of those places known as video rental stores, like *Blockbuster*.

"It's like taking everything out of Netflix and putting it all into CDs in a box and on a shelf. But not everything on Netflix. Only the shows and movies someone picked out because they thought were more relevant," she explained to her classmates a few years later, thinking about things she missed. Some of the other kids would smile and nod as if they were remembering something from a really, really, long time ago.

But it was thanks to that old "tradition" that she'd seen lots of great cartoon movies and lots of classics from the 80s, like *The Goonies*, *Ghostbusters*, *Howard the Duck*, and *Karate Kid*.

Arnold Turing wasn't always at home, which made him even more valuable in the eyes of his niece. Every once in a while, he would disappear for a few days. He'd grab his patched jean backpack, put all his electronics inside, give Mara a kiss on the forehead and say: "Hasta la vista, baby." She knew that the catchphrase he'd always say to her with a deep voice was from a movie from the early 90s called *Terminator 2*. But she'd never seen it because her mother felt she wasn't old enough to see

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certain things yet. “Also, John Connor uses lots of computer gadgets in the worst way possible. So, forget it,” Mrs. Hopper would tell Mara to make sure she understood that particular movie would not be part of her childhood.

Mara missed her uncle when he wasn’t there. Arnold made sure Mara felt she could trust him under any circumstance and didn’t feel she was missing a father figure in her life. “I’m sort of like your dad,” he’d say. And in a way, it was true. Mara didn’t feel like she was missing anything in her daily life, even if a few mean kids at the daycare center would remind her she didn’t have a “real dad.” Sadly, those little guys eventually grew up and were now students at Saint Michael, too.

Her early life hadn’t been too different from the rest of her classmates. But on February 11<sup>th</sup> of 2006, everything would change. Without any sort of warning, someone decided to edit the script that day and change the “hasta la vista, baby” to a final goodbye. Neither Sandra nor Mara knew that they wouldn’t see Lucas Turing’s brother ever again.

During the first few weeks they thought something might have happened that wouldn’t let him get in contact. Mara would sometimes walk up to the shelf where there was a framed picture of her uncle. She would touch the glass that covered his black *DEFCON* cap and whispered for him to come back. That’s probably when her OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder) started and began developing some of the obsessions she still had to this day.

Uncle Arnold was the perfect father figure. Not only was he sweet, loving, and understanding, but he also taught Mara many things. At the age of five, she already knew what it was

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like to not have a father and lose someone she really loved (and needed). With time, she understood the difference between being aware of something and feeling or accepting.

Mara tried to toughen up in front of her mom so she wouldn't notice how much she was falling apart. This helped develop her tough character. She learned how to hold back her tears and keep her feelings to herself, which also led to the anxiety, insomnia, and mood swings she'd had to learn how to cope with.

After Arnold's disappearance, she also gave up on some of the events she used to love. No more going to the video store, no more Cut-out Nights, Science Sundays, Comic Tuesdays, or Musical Thursdays. She still wasn't allowed anywhere near electronic devices without her mom's supervision, but her love and admiration for her uncle skyrocketed.

He was still alive in Mara's heart. She would never say it out loud, but her uncle had been so important to her and she just couldn't understand how he could have just vanished into thin air without giving her a chance to say goodbye.

Was he really trying to communicate with her through the tablet? Just the thought of it made her smile into the mirror right before walking out of the bathroom and back to class. She'd been in there far too long.

The sound of other students in their classes echoed through the hallway as she walked back. There were only a few minutes left before the bell rang and they all stampeded out of the building, just like every other Friday. She got to her class before she knew it and went back in quietly.

She grabbed the tablet and stuffed it into her backpack. Meanwhile, both of her friends, Noa Wachowski and Daniel

Karamanou, completely oblivious to what had just happened to her, were looking at Mara with a smile of complicity. They thought she was buying time before the clock struck “out-of-jail o’clock.” She walked over to their desks and told them what had just happened.

“My uncle Arnold spoke to me,” she whispered into her friends’ ears, who had huddled their heads together.

“Right...” Daniel gave Noa a look that said, “Our pal’s totally lost her mind.” They both knew that was unlikely.

“He needs my help, but he didn’t say anything else,” said Mara, shrugging while trying to keep her voice down. “I think I’m going to take the tablet home and show my mom. But I know she’s going to think I’m nuts! I don’t know... I’ll figure out a way to tell her without making a fuss.”

“Alright, but be careful. We’re not allowed to take those things. And Hermenegilda doesn’t just give detention to the perpetrator... but to their friends, too!” claimed Noa. Daniel and Mara nodded to calm her down.

“Yeah, yeah, I agree. But what’s a *perpetrator*? Someone that *perpetrenates*, right? What’s *perpetrenating*?” asked Daniel.

“It’s per-pe-trate. Someone that perpetrates! To perpetrenate isn’t a thing. That doesn’t exist,” Noa corrected him. “A perpetrator is a person who carried out a harmful or illegal action as per the laws established in the country or place they’re in...” Noa started explaining while starting to raise her voice and using a teacher-like tone.

“A perpetrator ith a perthon who hath carried out a harmful or illegal... Noa, I honestly only understood ‘person’ from

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everything you just blabbered,” said Daniel while flailing his hands as if he had gone crazy.

Mara smiled while enjoying the scene her friends were making, and for a moment forgot about what had happened just a few minutes ago.

She put on her backpack where she was carrying, among other things, Mr. Lotz, an old run-down interactive toy she’d brought along with her over the past several years. But there was much more crammed inside of her bag! She had lots of pens, all out of their pencil case, shavings from her sharpener, pencils, bits of her eraser, and wrinkled papers with unfinished exercises. Her mother always told her how messy it was. But Mara thought one couldn’t have everything in life. “Super smart and tidy? That’d be too much,” she’d tell herself every time Sandra would tell her off for having her room messy.

When the longest hand on the clock over the chalkboard was over the number 12, the bell rang. Noa, Daniel, and Mara rushed out of the classroom and ran down the hallway as if someone were chasing them. Pushing, shoving, nudging and a lot of screaming, Saint Michael’s usual Friday stampede was like an avalanche where parents had to fight against each other to grab their younger kids however they could. Parents did whatever was necessary to keep children from running off like wild hyenas and risk being run over by a car.

Noa and Daniel said their goodbyes to their friend and kept walking down the sidewalk until they turned the corner at the end of the street to go to their own homes.

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Mara opened the car door and climbed in, fastening her seat belt with a click. Wedging her backpack between her feet and the floor, she looked over at her mom. “Hi, Mom.”

“How was your day, Mara?” Her mom was waiting with the car running while checking her e-mail on her phone. Setting the phone down, she looked over her shoulder as she put the car into gear.

They began their drive home.

“All good. Ms. Wright didn’t give me detention, so I can’t really complain. Oh! Also, someone-tried-to-talk-to-me.” She rushed through that last sentence. Her heart sped up as the words flew from her mouth. Mara stared out the window, trying to act casual, but couldn’t help but watch her mother’s reflection to see how she reacted.

“What do you mean someone tried to talk to you?” she replied, pronouncing those last words much slower than the others so her daughter knew she had clearly heard her.

“Nobody...”

“Mr. Nobody tried to talk to you? Interesting.”

“It was Uncle Arnold.”

Sandra hit the brake suddenly and pulled over. Reaching over, she turned off the car radio and closed her eyes for a couple of seconds. She opened her eyes again and let out a long breath of air, as if trying to stay calm. Sandra put on the best smile she could and put her arm behind the front passenger seat and turned to look at Mara in the back seat.

“What are you on about, Mara? You know your uncle’s not with us anymore.”

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“You’re wrong. He is. He was in my tablet. He talked to me while I was playing...”

“He’s not alive!” Sandra snapped nervously, cutting her daughter off mid-sentence. She changed her tone suddenly, “He’s gone to heaven, sweetie. Why would you make up something like that?”

“I’m not making it up! I was listening to music and...”

Her daughter’s voice began to fade into the background while Mrs. Hopper began remembering her sweet and kind brother-in-law, Arnold. He had been the perfect uncle until the day he disappeared, leaving behind clues that led the cops to believe he had been working for Falko McKinnon, one of the biggest crackers’ of all time.

Sandra then understood that Arnold Turing had always been an expert in disappearing. Years before he had left their house for good, Falko McKinnon and the rest of his henchmen had been forced to delete all their personal online history.

It had been after the IFV attack, an unprecedented act of terrorism. During the months following the disastrous event that had taken human lives, authorities tried their best to find the ones behind it, but always came out empty-handed. There was no trace of them.

This all happened before Mara was even born. McKinnon’s crew, also known as the Dirtee Loopers, had completely vanished from the face of the earth. The same happened with all their online data, blog articles and, in general, any information there could’ve been about them on the Internet or any other darker network. Some considered this to be the most incredible case of online identity removal.

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*1 Malicious hackers that use their knowledge to commit crimes.*

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That massive disappearance highlighted Falko's and the Loopers' legacy. Had they been abducted by aliens? Did the government put an end to them because they discovered a hidden secret? Or maybe they moved somewhere really far away to spend all the money they had made during their years as crackers?

Sandra Hopper learned about all of this several years later. Arnold's physical disappearance and the news that came out afterwards had been a big disappointment for her. She had no idea there was another side to her brother-in-law. This also led Mara to discover what her mother was trying to protect her from all this time. The Internet was full of websites with text, images, and videos with all kinds of rumors and stories about the Dirtee Loopers. Some were a sort of tribute; others were harsh criticism. When it came to McKinnon, there was no middle ground.

Although Mara had asked her mother if all those stories about her uncle were true, she never got a convincing answer. Sandra wanted to make sure Mara remembered her uncle as the nice and sweet man he had seemed to be. Even if she tried to ruin Mara's idea of her uncle, it would be impossible. Arnold was almost like a demi-god to his niece, she loved him unconditionally.

Mrs. Hopper snapped back to reality and a question raced through her mind. Is Arnold still alive and trying to communicate with us? Shaking her head and tapping her fingers on the steering wheel she argued with herself. No, it can't be. He's dead, Sandra. He's been dead for seven years. She turned to glance at Mara who was watching her mother closely.

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Mara's mother quickly turned to face forward once again and began to drive. She kept driving mindlessly until they reached 4815 Threepwood street, where they'd been living for the past twelve years. She parked the car on the opposite side of the street and crossed the road to get to their house, Mara next to her toting her heavy backpack.

"Mara, in these cases it's important that you remember..."

"That I shouldn't get anywhere near those gadgets without your supervision. I know! Please, stop bugging me with that. It's tough enough being the weirdo with no electronic stuff." Mara was fed up of hearing the same story. With a sigh, she walked the house and dropped her bag.

Glancing at it, she thought it would probably be best to not mention she had brought the tablet along with her. The tablet through which Arnold had tried to communicate with her. She looked up and saw her mother watching her.

"It's fine, Mom. Sorry. I'm just really nervous. I miss Uncle Arnold each and every day and I get my hopes up very easily." She tried to sound as calm as possible so her mother would let her go back up to her room, where she could see if there were any more messages.

Her mother smiled. "Of course, dear. I can be quite repetitive as well. Shall we eat?"

Mara wasn't hungry, but she didn't want to seem suspicious. She ate a plate of leftover spaghetti and meatballs, helped clear the table and wash the dishes, and then asked for permission to go up to her room and read.

After double-checking that her door was properly closed, she pulled the tablet out of the backpack. She grabbed it with

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both hands and held it right in front of her, looking at it as if it were a very valuable treasure. And it was, at least for her.

She quickly turned it on, plugged her earphones in, and clicked on the same game icon that had previously shown the message from Uncle Arnold. An image popped up, then grew distorted before the tablet turned off.

“Oh, come on! This can’t be happening right now. Please, turn back on. I want to know what you have to say...” said Mara in a low voice before giving the tablet a few smacks and getting it to work again. She waited as the glow of the screen stopped flickering and showed what she wanted to see.

“I’m your uncle, Arnold Turing. I need you to help me, please.”

She smiled.

“Of course, Uncle! What can I do for you?” she whispered at the screen.

The device started displaying a sequence of pictures, as if someone on the other side had heard her. Mara saw that under the pictures there was text with something that looked like instructions. A picture of the Empire State building said the following: “You’ll see me again in New York while on holiday, but you must overcome some challenges first. That way I can make sure nobody knows our plan.”

Her eyes were glowing. She was, in fact, flying to the Big Apple the following day with her mother. It was her reward for doing so well in school. She was already excited because that meant she would be far away from all the brats at Saint

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Michael. But now it also meant that she'd get to see one of the people she loved the most in the world.

She quickly glanced at the door in case her mother decided to come in at that very moment. "Focus, Mara," she told herself while looking back at the screen. "Alright, Uncle Arnold. Tell me what I've gotta do and I'll take care of the rest."

Another picture displayed a garage door with the following address: 37-02 27<sup>th</sup> Street, Long Island City, Queens, New York. "You must go here and convince Alex Marley to teach you how to program," said the text under the image.

Learn how to program in a *garage*? Uh... sure, thought Mara with her eyebrows raised.

"Programming is the language of hackers. In order to see each other you need to understand certain things about my world. Remember this: 400nkc." The photo sequence went on with a picture of a laughing green skull wearing a harlequin hat, and in the background were a series of newspaper headlines on cyberattacks that had happened over a decade ago.

The next image moved Mara. It was a picture of her in her mother's arms when she was a little kid. "You'll have to deceive her. She can't know what we're doing. Nobody can know until we meet in person. It's not safe and I could die," read the text under the photo. After a few blinks, the title screen of the game Mara had tried to open before at school appeared.

"Die? No, please... I'd be all alone in this world," she whispered, frightened by that last part of her uncle's message.

If she understood correctly, which she usually did, she needed to use her vacation in New York City to learn how to

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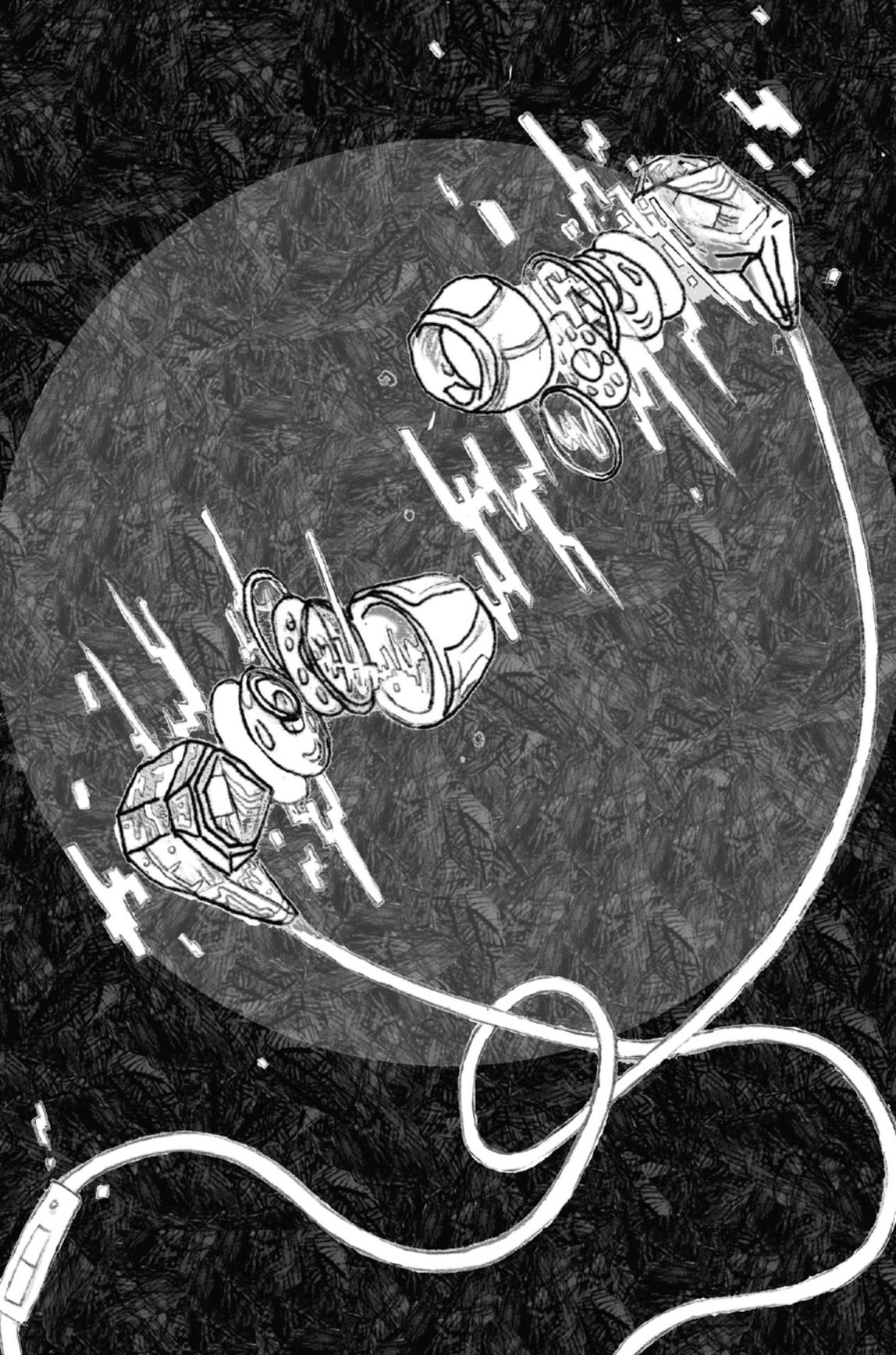
program in a stranger's garage. That would lead her to finding her uncle and, in the meantime, her mother could never find out what was going on. It doesn't seem too hard, Mara thought to herself, except the part about keeping my mom out of it. She always finds out about everything! She fell back on her bed with both excitement and a just a tinge of worry at what the coming days would bring.

Sandra Hopper was typing away on her laptop downstairs. She had a concentrated look, but still couldn't get Mara's story out of head. I know my brother-in-law isn't alive, but who would want to make Mara think he is? she wondered while typing numbers into a spreadsheet. She was good with machines, but repetitive tasks bored her. She was obsessed with having everything ready before leaving on vacation so she could allow herself to enjoy the time off.

Once she was done with her work and had sent e-mails to her boss to hopefully prevent him from having to call her, she decided it was time to turn off her laptop and continue packing for their trip to New York in a few hours.

She got up from her chair and as she was turning her head, she thought she'd noticed her webcam's green light flickering. She got closer to the camera and gave it a few taps with her index finger. Nothing. It was turned off. Maybe it was just her imagination, or maybe it was light from the window that had reflected on the screen.

But she was wrong.



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