

Evil Reborn

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A note for American readers

As you enter the world of these young hackers, you'll see at times the phrases, words, and spellings are a little different. As our teenage friends live in Liverpool, in the United Kingdom, we chose to keep their speech and spellings the same as other readers in the United Kingdom and Spain have been enjoying. These are the same words and spellings Mara, Noa, and Daniel are accustomed to using. The author feels this will lend an authentic feel to their environment, as well as show the differences between countries.

To all those curious and adventurous souls
who chose to read my first book on Mara Turing
despite the infinite digital and non-digital entertainment
options they could have chosen from.

To all those teachers who break the script
to make learning something fun and exciting.
Especially those who encourage kids
to see things from a different perspective
in order to build a better world.

Chapter 1

A YEAR MORE, A YEAR LESS

"Run, Mara! They're hot on our heels!"

Her sneakers squeaked as she stopped at the end of the hallway, right before slamming into the wall. They had to turn right to reach the gym. Daniel was running right behind her. He slid his left foot ahead to make the tight turn. He hit the wall with his left shoulder as his cap flew off his head. There was no time to complain. The door was right in front of them and their chasers were only a few feet away.

Nick Jordan was running straight towards them, fists and teeth clenched, heels almost reaching his backside with each powerful step forward. His pal, Tom Balzary, was tailing him while holding up his mobile phone. He wanted to get it all on camera for their star broadcast that week. That kind of content would fit great with the autumn season of Salamander Squad's video channel. "I need to stabilize the camera a bit or our viewers are gonna puke while watching this," Balzary thought with the little oxygen going to his brain.

"Outta the way, you brat!"

Unfortunately, Martha Winklewood's path crossed with Nick's. He ran right into her, making her fall backwards. The folder she was holding flew out of her hands and her orange juice spilled onto her clothes and the floor. This accident gave Mara and Daniel a few extra seconds, but not many, since Nick only lost his balance.

"We're not done with you, loser. We need you for next week's episode… smile at the camera, mate!"

Tom slowed down to avoid slipping on the orange juice puddle and turned around, pointing his camera at Year Eight Sissy (she moved up a year). He got her complete reaction, which was a mix of surprise, anger, resignation and I'm-going-to-kill-you-right-now.

The weirdo, Mara Turing, and her friend, Daniel Karamanou, were one man down that day. The Salamanders took advantage of the fact that Noa Wachowski was home sick. She'd messaged her friends that morning saying she had a fever. The school bullies weren't too sure what to do with the other two, but ever since the whole incident back in Times Square with the drones, out of control vehicles, and giant screens, the three of them had become popular targets.

That day, Nick and Tom were walking by the lockers and saw the friends grabbing their books. Nothing else had happened that day that could justify that chase around the school that would lead them into Saint Michael's gymnasium, where Professor Andrew Pippen was teaching some kids how to hold a ball before shooting at the hoop.

Basketball lessons were interrupted by the sound of a slamming door and a loud ruckus. After running through the doorway, Mara quickly came to a halt and stood on her tippy toes before falling down the bleacher stairs. Daniel tried doing the same but had miscalculated, so he had to grab onto his friend's waist to keep himself from falling head-first. They had both been extremely close to tumbling down.

"Don't get used to my irresistible touch, little lady," he said to Mara as he looked around the gym.

"If you don't let go of me this instant, you're the one that's gonna get used to my fist!" Mara snapped. She began searching for an exit.

They reached the main area of the gym just as the Salamander Squad burst through the door, scanning for their victims.

"There they are, Tom! Don't let 'em get away! We're breaking an audience record today."

Mara was expecting Mr. Pippen to help them out, but instead he decided to look away and continue with his class. Daniel shrugged,

grabbed his friend's hoodie and pulled her towards the basketball court exit. They went around the court, surprised that their teacher wasn't going to do anything to help out.

"Mr. Pippen, help! We're being chased by bullies!" Daniel begged him.

"Don't look at me, I'm only covering for Mr. Walker. So, leave me out of your little games and let me do my job."

"Argh! Thanks for nothing!" Daniel snarled.

The two quickly ran out the emergency exit that led to the backyard behind the gym. After shutting the door behind them, they ran towards the wire fence that separated the school from the back alley where trash was thrown out. They both jumped and grabbed onto it as best as they could.

"Looks like we're the Salamanders now, climbing like little lizards. Hey, maybe they'll let us join their crew!" Daniel joked with a nervous smile across his face.

"I honestly cannot fathom how you manage to joke in situations like these." Even after being friends for years, Mara still couldn't understand how Daniel could be cracking a joke when they were about to get beaten up… or worse.

"Stop right there! You've got nowhere to run, geeks!" Tom yelled, almost out of breath. Their prey was only a few feet away.

Daniel had already managed to climb to the top of the fence, but Mara was having a rough time. She wasn't the best when it came to climbing. Nick pulled his hair back, grinned and reached for his back pocket, where he had a black permanent marker. He looked at Tom, who was standing right next to him and recording with his phone.

"Cows and sheep are marked to know what herd they belong to. Which one do you nerds belong to?" Nick asked, as he turned to look at them, and then back at the camera. "No worries, we'll mark you as well, so you don't forget! Be sure to hit that *like* button if you're enjoying this, Salamanders. Let's go, Tom!"

Balzary and Jordan made their way to the fence. Daniel was already climbing down the other side, but Mara's leg got stuck on her way up.

"Come on, Mara! Jump down!" Daniel yelled.

"What do you think I'm trying to do!? And quit yelling, it's not helping," she replied as she tried as hard as she could to free her leg from the fence.

Nick jumped and grabbed Mara, although she managed to hang onto the fence without falling off.

"You better be getting all of this, bud. It's gonna be epic! Alright guys, so this is what's going on: Daniel the dumbass is on the other side, powerless. Mara is on top of the fence, hopeless. And this marker can't wait to get its ink on her nerdy skin!"

"Here, Nick. Get a close-up shot of it, they're gonna like it more," Tom suggested as he handed the phone, still recording, to his friend.

"Great idea, mate!" said Nick. He grabbed the phone and continued recording just a few inches from his victim.

The camera was filming all the dizzying movements as well as the sound of Mara shaking the fence while trying to break free. Although her priority was getting to the other side, she was also trying not to ruin her overalls she'd gotten the previous summer back in New York. It's not the most important thing right now, but there's a whole story behind these, she thought, as she kept tugging, trying to free herself.

Nick then grabbed the front pocket on Mara's overalls and tugged hard. She fell over just enough to hear a tear. The pants had torn from her ankle up to her knee.

"I swear to—!" Mara had had enough.

She huffed and reached into her right pocket, pulling out something Nick and Tom had never seen before. It looked like a homemade device made from batteries, electrical tape, cables, a copper wire, and a small button.

"Whatcha gonna do? Hit me on the head with that?" Nick was pointing the camera at Mara's face and, every once in a while, he'd point it at the device.

Mara smiled. "No, something even better…"

Daniel had no idea what was going on, but he decided to pull out his phone and begin recording as well. That's when the tables turned and it was Mara who was trying to reach Nick with the gadget while grabbing on to the fence.

Then it happened.

She stuck the unidentified device to the phone Nick was holding, pushed a button and killed it. An unexpected turn of events to end the Salamander Squad's video of the week.

"What've you done, you prick? What's up with my phone!? It was fully charged…" Nick and Tom were staring at the device as it was restarting on its own. Their best video for that week was ruined.

Without anybody pressing the restart button, the expensive smartphone was displaying the fruit logo and a loading bar on the screen. While both boys were distracted, Mara put her leg over the fence and hopped over to the other side. Nick and Tom were staring at their screen in frustration as she was getting away.

Mara and Daniel bolted off. They ran down the alley and made a turn when they reached the main street. Pushing open the door, they went into Lauper's Cakes, a famous cafeteria on Winston Churchill Avenue. Quickly the pair walked all the way to the back while customers were interrupted at their breakfast, turning their heads to see what was going on.

Amanda Lauper, owner of the famous cafeteria in Liverpool, was holding the warehouse door open with her hip as she saw both kids walking fast-paced towards her through the bathroom hallway. The young hacker apprentice signaled at her with her hands, asking if they could hide in there for a bit. This wasn't their first rodeo;

they'd had to hide in that warehouse more than once. Miss Lauper winked and let them in.

They both ran inside. Daniel sat on the floor and laid his back against the closed door. He lifted his arm and touched his head, then remembered that he'd lost his cap a while back. But it didn't matter, they both managed to run away from Saint Michael's bullies. And not only that, but they outplayed them and got it all on video.

"Alright, Mara, spill the beans. What the hell did you do to Tom's phone? The look on their faces was just…"

"I used a thing I built a few days ago while looking at a video on the internet. It's called an Electromagnetic Pulse Generator," she replied as she folded her arms across her chest, looking very proud. "Mr. Marley and my uncle will be really proud once I tell them!"

"Right… So, what does it do? Destroy phones? Because they're gonna hunt you down if you've ruined their amazing phone with an ultra-high-quality camera."

"Of course not, it just messes it up for a few seconds," Mara explained. "All you need is a strong battery, an electromagnetic capacitor, and a disposable camera."

"Uh… Sure. No idea what you just said, but I'm glad you did that. Now we just need to wait here for a bit while they cool down."

Daniel had actually understood way more than he was willing to admit. After their summer in Alex Marley's garage, his interest in programming and electronics had skyrocketed. He knew that the circuit Mara had just described was, in fact, pretty easy to set up and use: a battery charged a capacitor[1] that discharges when you press a button, generating an electromagnetic pulse that affects any nearby electronic devices.

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1 A capacitor is an electric component that stores electrical energy when introduced into a circuit, which is then released with a discharge. That release is what produces an electric current in the electromagnetic coil and generates the Electromagnetic Pulse.

What was really amazing, was the fact that she had one on her and thought about using it at that precise moment.

They hid in the warehouse for more than five minutes as they laughed at the video Daniel had recorded on his phone. He kept replaying it by sliding his finger across the screen, watching the bullies reactions as Mara activated the device on their phone. Once he was done watching it for the tenth time, he sent the video to Noa so she would have some entertainment while she recovered from her cold. She replied almost instantly with lots of laughing emojis.

That small victory was going to have its consequences, but Mara and Daniel wanted to make the most of it. Especially after everything that had happened in the past few months.

In a little over nine months, Mara had…

…received a mysterious message from her uncle, Arnold Turing, who she thought had died several years ago.

…convinced her mother, Sandra Hopper, to rent an apartment in Queens instead of Manhattan for a summer trip to New York.

…lied to her friends in order to visit the garage of a stranger (Alex Marley) every day to learn about programming.

…decided to become a hacker.

…survived an attempt to run her over with a garbage truck and a massive drone attack in the middle of Times Square.

…lied to her mother twice, to the point where she nearly lost her trust.

…learned about the existence of an evil artificial intelligence called Hermes and its creator, Falko McKinnon. They both wanted her dead.

…found another mysterious yet hopeful message from her uncle in her hoodie pocket on the flight back to Liverpool.

She also became the Salamander Squad's favorite target. They thought her new fame would help them reel in more views in their online pranking career.

"I think we should get going, Daniel. We shouldn't skip any more classes for today," Mara suggested as she got up and wiped the dirt off her clothes.

"They're gonna kill us once we get back. Should I send them the video?"

"Why? That'll just make them angrier."

"We could use it as blackmail! They touch us and I post the video online so everyone can see what a bunch of losers they are." Daniel started tapping on his phone.

> *Dear Tom and Nick,*
> *We're on our way back to school. Look at how cute you both look in this video. Nick's hair in the wind, Tom's braces and the big WTF on your faces when Mara used her electromagnetic pulse generator (don't pretend like you know what it is) on your phone. I've uploaded this to different servers privately. If you touch us or say anything at all, we'll make it public. Got it?*
> *Cheers.*
> *Mara, Daniel and *achoo* Noa*

Daniel sent the message to both of them with the video attached. Nick responded a minute later.

> *hi*
> *u publish this vid n u die*
> *we wont do anything*
> *u can come back whnevr*

He had also added several emojis that made it clear they were pretty pissed.

Mara read Nick's answer on her friend's phone and smiled. They could go back to Saint Michael without the fear of getting chased

down once again. But, just in case, Mara was going to recharge her generator's battery as soon as she could.

They both got back in time for second period. Music History with Hermenegilda Wright.

"Can't wait to start that *exciting class*," Daniel said sarcastically. They walked around the block to reach the main school entrance. "It's safer than the back door we went out of before."

They slowed down the pace as they got closer, looking around them, behind trees, up at the windows… anywhere they thought Nick and Tom could be hiding. The coast was clear, so they walked inside. They grabbed onto each other's arms, just like Dorothy and the Scarecrow walking down the *Yellow Brick Road* in the *Wizard of Oz*. The hallway was empty. All they could hear was the faint sound of people talking inside the classrooms. There were flyers all over the walls about the next field trip they were having for their cultural week. It was a weekend on the outskirts of Liverpool with lots of sports activities, watching movies, and several contests.

"Should we go, Mara?" Daniel asked while pointing at one of the flyers.

"I don't think my mom would be too thrilled about it. She might think we'll get attacked by some drones… or Hermes."

"We can tell Noa in case she wants to tag along. Maybe both of our parents can convince your mom."

Time flew by as they spoke about the upcoming field trip. The sudden racket and sound of chairs dragging across the floor meant Math class was over. They both walked inside the classroom and got ready for next period with Ms. Wright, who walked in a short while after, holding her old radio cassette player and placing it on her table.

"Hello, dear students. I hope you've checked your notes on yesterday's class because… we're having a pop quiz!" she announced

right before pressing a button on her radio cassette player to start Richard Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries*. She began clapping lightly to the sound of the music.

Some of the students threw their hands over their faces, others just looked terribly annoyed. The rest decided to give in and started pulling out blank papers and writing their names on the top right corner. Hermenegilda truly enjoyed that song.

"Just imagine a huge ship! An epic pirate attack! Sailors on port and starboard, a scoundrel making his way up the mast with a dagger in his mouth. Saltpeter on their skins. A parrot on peg leg's shoulder. All ready and set for imminent attack with boarding!"

Bob Morris, who was still class representative, looked around and put his index finger up to his temple indicating that Ms. Wright had completely lost it. Liza Costello nodded at him.

"You have thirty minutes to write down on a piece of paper what this song makes you feel, think, or see. I want a clean and organized text, I want to know what your small rusted minds can come up with when listening to this magnificent melody," she ordered as she looked around over her small glasses while she finished rewinding[2] the cassette tape.

After a few more sighs, grunts, and the sound of rustling paper, the class began to write. Everyone imagined completely different things, but most of the students came up with very elaborate ideas. Hermenegilda began to read them as the students handed them in.

"Mhm… The first one to finish is James Rooney. He said… uh, what is this!?" she asked as she held the paper closer to her face, as if that would help her understand what it meant. "Listening to this

2 Compact cassette tapes were commonly used for storing and playing music since the '70s up until the early 2000s. It was a system based on a tape that contained signals that, when read by a magnetic head, they turned into music. Along with vinyl records, it was the most widely used form of musical reproduction at home.

piece by Mr. Wagner reminds me of a stampede in a game called *Kill 'em All 7* after all your weapons are fully buffed and end up in the middle of the street surrounded by dead bodies."

The teacher put the paper back on her desk and reached for the next one.

> *Ride of the Valkyries is a masterpiece. I love the crescendo and how they keep adding instruments. It's like when you upload a new pic on Instagram and start getting thousands of likes, comments and new followers. (William Spreitz)*

And the next one…

> *This piece takes me back to when I'm alone in my room, downloading all the pictures from my camera, and editing them before uploading them to my blog. That's when I turn my last trip into a story that can be shared with all my followers, so they live it from my point of view. (Alison Wander)*

Three exams with three different stories that Ms. Wright couldn't wrap her head around. What really caught her by surprise was not understanding Alison's text. She was a sensitive girl with an incredible writing and musical talent. The teacher stopped reading out loud, put on a fake smile to hide her confusion, and quietly sat down. This was a sight to see, as the class was used to her constantly walking about and talking non-stop in her loud voice during the entire lesson.

Her obsession for sticking to all things traditional and analogical was creating a giant gap between her and her students. She was old, but not that old, and decided she wouldn't be able to stand that isolation much longer.

That pop quiz had sure been a surprise, but especially for her. After everyone had finished, she grabbed the pile of papers and put them in her black leather briefcase. A briefcase that was now living proof of her disconnection from the world she was living in. Once class was over, she went back to her office and pulled out a highlighter. She was going to mark every single word or expression she couldn't understand.

Mara and Daniel, on the other hand, were pretty calm during class. They didn't let their guard down completely, though. Taking their eyes off of Tom and Nick was dangerous, especially when you could feel their anger from only a few feet away.

Mara hid her smile imagining how if they could read the minds of the two Salamander Squad leaders, they'd probably be thinking something like: "What the hell was Mara holding that broke our phone?" or "Why'd it reset without pressing any buttons?" or "Where d'ya reckon that brat learned how to build that?" based on the glares the two bullies kept giving her.

The rest of the day went by with History, Literature, and Biology. When the clock struck two, the usual student stampede began. Students that weren't in such a hurry left a while after. Mara and Daniel were part of that second group.

"Wait a minute!"

Ms. Wright bolted out of the office. She seemed to be in a hurry. She was holding a bunch of papers she'd been highlighting for hours, hands slightly shaking. The look on her face plus what had happened back in her class gave the kids a hint on what was troubling her. Ms. Wright's analogical world was crumbling right before her eyes, and her pop quiz had proved to her that denying the impact of technology for so long wasn't the best idea she'd had.

"How can we help you, Ms. Wright?" Daniel asked in a very polite manner.

"I need your knowledge. I'm in quite a jam. You see, I seem to be quite outdated. A lot, actually. It's like I'm living in the Middle Ages… no, in the Paleolithic period! I have no idea what your world is like, I have no idea what you kids talk about. I've still got about twenty years left as a teacher, and I really don't want to go through what happened this morning ever again."

She looked up to the ceiling to keep tears from running down her cheeks. Everything she knew about Music, History, or Literature was pointless if she couldn't communicate properly with her students.

"Calm down, we can help you get up to date!" said Mara as she put her hand over Hermenegilda Wright's arm. It felt weird being a student comforting a teacher, like the world had turned upside down for a second.

"What am I supposed to learn?" their teacher asked, sounding both curious and doubtful.

"Give us your e-mail address, Worm- HERMENEGILDA!" Daniel quickly tried to fix the fact that he was about to call her by the nickname the rest of the students knew her as.

"Don't worry, Mr. Karamanou. I've heard people calling me that name… I deserve it."

Both kids saw how devastated she was. Her self-esteem was beyond low and they wanted to help her and best as they could.

"No, nobody deserves that. Just like I don't deserve to be called 'know-it-all', 'freak', 'brat' and stuff like that," Mara pointed out. "You're going to be learning a lot from now on. We'll teach you everything you need to know."

"Never again will I be ignorant. Heed my words!" proclaimed the teacher, pressing the papers she was holding against her chest.

"If I may, Ms. Wright," Daniel was ready to start her lessons as soon as possible. "You might want to consider using expressions

from the century we're living in. 'Heed my words' sounds way too outdated."

Hermenegilda quickly began nodding her head. They were her teachers now, *tabula rasa*[3].

It had only been a little over three weeks since the friends had gotten back from their trip to New York, and autumn had already made its way into Liverpool throughout the month of September. That year was going to be really long if they had to deal with an angry Salamander Squad. Thanks to Mara and her device, they didn't have any new video to upload that day. The Electromagnetic Pulse Generator was part of the arsenal she was secretly making. As the good hacker in the making she was, she didn't want to hurt anyone, but rather deactivate anyone who would want to hurt her. Hermes, Falko, Tom, Nick… the list of potential enemies was ever growing and there wasn't much she could do about it.

They stopped by the Saint Michael's cafeteria with Hermenegilda Wright before leaving school. They each grabbed something to eat and headed towards the computer room.

"Ms. Wright, this is going to be your new classroom for the next few weeks," Daniel proudly claimed as he opened the door to a room that Hermenegilda had never been in.

"Oh, well, hello there, Hermenegilda Wright. I think I have enough memory in my system to spy on a new subject," Hermes wrote down in its log file. Falko McKinnon's artificial intelligence had made its way into every single computer in the school Mara, Noa, and Daniel went to. They were always extremely cautious, but that still wasn't enough to completely fight off the knowledge and power that beast had.

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3 Tabula rasa means uninscribed tablet. It's sometimes used as "clean slate", which means that past events will not be taken into account. In this case, it refers to Hermenegilda Wright's past.

Noa Wachowski, for example, convinced the school principal to cover all the webcams with tape and deactivate all the microphones. They were never used in class, and someone else could use them to record students without their permission. However, the security cameras couldn't be covered. And that's what Hermes used to keep an eye on everything that happened inside that building. Blind spots weren't an issue, as he could use the cameras on phones of those students who weren't really careful.

Most kids downloaded apps and games without really knowing what they were actually installing on their devices. Hermes *knew* that, so it made sure to place cracked versions of the most popular apps on every search engine. Car racing, medieval battles, intelligence duels, and basically any game genre had free *sponsored* (tampered) versions, courtesy of artificial intelligence.

The whole plot was pretty simple: a student with a non-cracked phone looks up a game that isn't free to play. Among the first options, they see a free version of it. Who would say no to a free version? It's not like teenagers can afford to buy lots of games. So, the student just needs to download Hermes' version of the game and their phone will automatically be infected. The camera, mic, and all installed apps become a part of the AI's whole.

So, despite Noa, Daniel and Mara being very cautious, their school was a sort of Big Brother in which their lives were monitored on a daily basis.

Hermenegilda faced her first computer lesson just like a small kid during their first ski class. She wouldn't question any orders she was given, nor think of the consequences this or that action could have. She placed her hands over the keyboard, just like she did with her old typewriter, and she pressed the first key. Daniel immediately jumped in.

"Lighter, Ms. Wright! If you press the keys like that, you'll end up drilling holes in the table."

The only thing she was used to typing on was her old Olympia SM3.

"Alright, alright…" she responded. She put her fingers over the plastic keyboard once again.

They began to explain what a mouse was and how it was used on a computer.

"The movements you make with it are transferred to the screen. Do you get it? And when the cursor is placed over something you wish to interact with, you press the left mouse button. That will tell the computer to execute an action, open a folder…" Daniel was trying to explain it all as best as he could.

An hour had gone by in the computer room. The first lesson seemed pretty fruitful, and it hadn't been that difficult. They explained to their teacher what a Start menu, username, password, file or folder, and many other terms were. She wrote everything down in her notebook.

"Hermenegilda Wright using a computer? Excellent. Now all she needs to start using is a mobile phone [desire]," Hermes considered. It was only able to see, not hear, what was happening in that classroom thanks to a security camera with poor resolution. Daniel and Mara's phones were well protected, so the artificial intelligence was unable to access their mics.

That silent film kept going while, thousands of miles away, someone was on the verge of losing their mental endurance.

