

# Hyperversum Next

by

Cecilia Randall

*English extract*

*Phoenix, Arizona, United States of America*

*May 6th, the near future, 17:30*

Alexandra Freeland had argued with her father. It had been for the usual reason: the umpteenth fail in her latest physics test, the fifth of that school year. She couldn't re-take one test before there was already another one, all because of that damned subject that she simply couldn't get her brain around. On top of that, this time she hadn't even been clever enough to hide the "incident" from her parents.

Alex snorted and stretched out on her bed where she lay fully dressed. She looked up at the ceiling, which glowed in the warm light of that Saturday afternoon, ignoring the text books and exercise books on the desk next to the computer. The smells of a barbeque wafted in through the open window, a typical outdoor activity in spring. The people outside were having fun and she was stuck in her bedroom. A whole weekend inside studying: she would have screamed if she thought it would make any difference.

She had to do well on next Monday's test, her father had declared, otherwise she would risk failing the whole school year. She didn't even want to think about what would happen then. The best-case scenario would be that her father gave her extra tutoring himself, for the whole summer, and certainly her mother would agree.

That intolerable idea made her sit up again. As always, her bangs fell over her eyes and she automatically pushed them back with the rest of her long mahogany-colored hair. She looked begrudgingly at the physics books that awaited her attention so the torture could commence once again.

That repulsive subject was ruining her life. It wouldn't stick in her mind, there was nothing she could do about it; she could study for months on end to no avail. It was easy for her dad to say she just had to apply herself more.

She hated physics and physics hated her, she was certain of it. All the sciences hated her, judging by the scant results that she achieved in math and chemistry, too. Yet she knew she wasn't stupid, she had great marks in all her other subjects, from history to geography, to art history and above all, she was top in her class in her beloved humanistic subjects: literature, French and Italian, subjects that were about art, not numbers and theorems. Unfortunately, her father, Daniel, was director of the National Laboratory of Physics and her mother, Jodie, was a doctor at the Phoenix Children's Hospital. Two such parents were not perfect for a daughter who hated scientific subjects at school, particularly as her brother Gabriel, at eleven, was already an ace in everything to do with numbers.

The electronic clock indicated the time was 5.30 pm.

*I have to get back to my studies,* Alex said to herself, though she stayed precisely where she was, secretly hoping that the books would be burned to a crisp by a short circuit, along with the entire desk. She thought about the lovely mild evening that was falling and felt even more frustrated. She was going to miss Debbie Newman's birthday party at her house in the hills with the big garden and swimming pool. She bit her lip. And to think that she had finished preparing days ago; she had even worked out how to style her hair so it would show off her silver-plated *chandelier* earrings; she had planned her outfit down to the last detail, behind her mother's back, obviously. She would never have approved the micro-mini. All this because Brad Parker, the most popular boy in school, would be at the party. It had taken months to find an opportunity to talk to him, well away from all those bimbos that constantly flocked around him. In the end she had managed, she had been able to get him to say that they would see each other at Debbie's house and now...

Now, all because of that damned fail, she would have to stay at home.

*What will I tell Brad? He'll laugh in my face!*

No, she would never have told him she was grounded like a little girl. She'd rather pretend she had simply decided not to go.

*It's not a real date, I'm not standing him up,* she corrected herself.

Yet, she hoped that Brad was similarly excited about seeing her that evening ... though, if that were the case, he would be disappointed and then judge her as the sort that stands people up. Unless someone explained the truth to him, in which case he would probably laugh at her.

*That dimwit Debbie was bound to tell him that she was stuck in her room with those despicable books!*

It was a vicious circle; no way out. One way or another she was going to look a fool and would have to start all over again with Brad, provided she could find the courage and the opportunity to speak to him again. She had even considered escaping to go to the party, but her parents weren't going out that Saturday evening, and, with nosy Gabe hanging around, there was no hope of her sneaking away unseen.

She may have lost the man of her life and it was all her dad's fault.

The smell of the barbecue outside continued to float in through the window and like never before Alex felt the urge to gather her notes and physics books and throw them on the fire. She shifted her eyes to the photo frame next to the computer and was immediately lost to the smiling man in the picture, who kept her company.

*Come and see me soon Uncle Ian, I miss you. If you had been here my dad wouldn't have locked me in the house!*

In truth, Ian Maayrkas wasn't her real uncle, just a childhood friend of her father's, but he had partly grown up at Freeland house since, at the age of sixteen, both his parents had died and he had been taken in by grandfather Alex. A brilliant academic, he had become university professor of medieval history at just thirty years of age. He had taught for a while amidst international peers and then suddenly he had decided to give it all up and dedicate his attentions full time to research and archaeological digs across the planet in such remote places that even the most cutting-edge mobile phones wouldn't pick up a signal.

Alex only saw him two or three times a year, when he came back to Phoenix and stayed at the Freeland's house for a few days, but she felt really close to him and knew that her uncle reciprocated her affection, perhaps because they had so much in common. They both loved literature, art and legends about war heroes and great enterprises. One of Alex's favourite memories would always be the day spent at the fantasy convention, when Ian had consented to go with her instead of her father Daniel who, surprise surprise, couldn't tolerate interest in anything fantasy.

*My dad and I disagree about everything, Alex observed.*

They didn't like the same kinds of books or films; they didn't appreciate the same music; they didn't even see eye to eye about sports: her dad was an archery expert, the sort that can stand absolutely immobile for five interminable minutes to concentrate on the perfect aim, whereas she, given half a chance, would have dedicated all her energies to extreme free-climbing. Since, however, her parents thought it was dangerous – no, really?! – she had had to give in to swimming and diving from the 10-metre platform when her parents weren't looking and the instructor allowed it.

With Ian everything was different. They spoke the same language, and they were complicit in so many things, as that magnificent day at the fantasy convention had demonstrated. Alex had dressed as an elf for the occasion; Ian had been persuaded to wear a cape and a fake chain mail suit of armor. He had consented to play the role of a feudal lord and had looked a million times more knightly than the kids who made great efforts to look like warriors. He had even handled a sword and given a demonstration of his ability that had astonished everyone.

*Dad never would have done that*, Alex said to herself. He preferred to dedicate his time to the computer; no way would he ever have wielded a sword and impersonated a medieval hero to make her happy.

Ian, on the other hand, fenced, rode a horse, told intriguing stories about the middle ages and spoke incredibly good French, like a native. When he took Alex to the museum, he always surprised her by reading with great ease the incomprehensible Latin pages of those gold illustrated manuscripts, which to her child's eyes looked like the magical books of an ancient wizard.

He even looked like the hero right from a novel. Tall, well-built, long, naturally flowing hair: he could have played the part of an errant knight in a film, if his constant smile hadn't revealed the serenity of a man at peace with the world.

*Lucky him*. Alex envied the woman who lived at his side, even though she had never seen her. Ian never spoke about her, but Alex had perceived veiled references in his conversation and knew that there was a woman in her uncle's life whom he loved passionately. Who knows who she was and why he never brought her back with him. At times, Alex had even suspected that Ian had children but this was just a vague supposition. That mysterious side to her uncle was the only dark spot on his otherwise irreproachable life, and sometimes this had caused a contrast with Alex's grandfather when he was still alive. Granddad John Freeland had been an ex-colonel in the army, a practical and rational man who was very similar to Daniel, and had never forgiven Ian for being such a vagabond, and so reticent about his private life. There had been tense moments at home, when Alex was young, and she remembered them, albeit confusedly.

*Thank goodness dad never harassed Uncle Ian about any of that*.

Despite many defects, at least her father had the virtue of loving Ian as a real brother. Alex, on the other hand, found Ian's mysterious side simply fascinating; although she had imagined incredible things about him, she hadn't investigated further for fear of compromising their relationship. The bottom line was that her father, her mother and even

Uncle Martin, Daniel's younger brother, accepted Ian's mysteries unreservedly, and their total and sincere trust was enough to reassure her.

The numbers on the clock changed again and brought her swiftly back to her most pressing problem: it was almost six in the evening and instead of getting ready for the party, she had to get back to the physics book.

Never before had she wanted to be as free as Ian to go to some far away country, distant from her father and his ridiculous impositions. Instead, she stood up and sank into the padded chair in front of her dreaded physics workbooks. She had no choice, if she was to spend a study-free summer, and that infuriated her even more because she felt trapped, while all the others were out having a good time.

Everyone, including Brad.

The mere thought brought the prickly sensation of tears to her eyes.

*I hate you, Dad!* she thought as she picked up her pen.

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(...)

A video call came through on the computer just before midday. Alex looked up from her workbook and recognised Debbie Newman's avatar.

*Not now*, she moaned to herself. *She'll ruin your Sunday*, her sixth sense added.

For a split second she thought she wouldn't answer, but curiosity got the better of her. She pressed the button to accept the call.

"Hi, are you already up?" Debbie said through the stereo speakers on the monitor.

"Obviously: I've been studying for three hours," Alex responded as she continued to highlight her notebook with phosphorescent colors.

"What about you? How come you're up so early after a wild night?"

"Hey, are you hiding? Turn the camera on!"

Alex huffed and pressed another button on the keyboard. The avatar was replaced by Debbie Newman's round face, her bedroom in the background. She was still in her pyjamas; her eyes were puffy and surrounded by smudges of eye shadow and mascara; her blond hair was tied back with a coloured elastic band.

“Ah, there you are,” she exclaimed. “You’re looking lively for a Sunday morning! Why are you in such good shape?”

“Modesty is the key to beauty, didn’t you know?” Alex replied pulling a face. “I was in bed by ten.”

“I was up until four. I feel like a wreck, I swear.” Debbie stretched on her chair. “It’s a real shame you didn’t come last night. You missed a great party.”

Alex braced herself for the worst. “I bet I did,” she said and her friend didn’t need any encouragement to carry on. Debbie launched into a detailed report which lasted at least ten minutes, not counting Alex’s monosyllabic answers. She described the decorations in the garden, the menu of little cakes and tartlets, the music, all their classmates’ clothes... non-stop.

Alex was quickly distracted, her bad mood slowly intensifying. Yup, that must have been a really great party and she was the only one who missed it.

She was still feeling sorry for herself when she heard, “Oh, by the way, Brad was looking for you yesterday.”

Her heart leapt.

“Really?”

“I didn’t know you had a date,” Debbie probed.

“Well, we just said we would see each other around, that’s all,” Alex answered, a little less naturally than she would have liked to.

“That’s OK then, I can stop worrying. I was afraid he would think you had stood him up so I... .”

“You, *what?*”

“I just thought I’d better explain that it wasn’t your fault that you weren’t there, I told him about your dad and everything.”

Alex could have strangled her. “And what did he say?”

“Oh, nothing much. He understood the situation.”

*And he started to laugh*, thought Alex, just biting her tongue in the nick of time and then burying her head in her hands. She fidgeted with the highlighter.

“He really was sympathetic. I wouldn’t have expected that reaction from someone like him. He said he’d argued lots of times with his own parents for the same reasons. I wouldn’t have believed him except that he told Emma the same thing.”

Alex’s eyes flew open, “Who?”

“Emma Carter. Brad spent the whole evening with her. I saw them dancing together, too. They looked like they were enjoying themselves.”

Her pounding heart stopped so suddenly it felt as though it had disappeared. Alex focused on the idea little by little and heard a crack as the plastic pen top broke in her hand. Not finding her, had Brad sought consolation with Emma Carter?

She imagined the scene: Emma, heart shaped lips, huge blue eyes, blond hair, always dressed to impress... or as she loved to repeat: "Always in the perfect outfit for the perfect occasion."

An *outfit* that, as a rule, clung like a second skin to all her generous curves, which never failed to blind any guy around, and that Alex would never be able to flaunt, as skinny and androgynous as she was.

Guys. They only cared about measurements. Brad included.

Alex felt a hot stab, unable to distinguish whether it was disappointment or anger.

"Listen, I've got to get back to studying, otherwise I'll never finish by tomorrow."

She was about to explode, but managed to keep her voice steady. The snub didn't go unnoticed.

"Of course, yes. Sorry I forgot you were busy. We'll catch each other at school tomorrow then."

"See you tomorrow. Bye," Alex clipped.

Video and avatar disappeared. Alex didn't move for a moment, and then she exploded.

"Dad, you owe me for this one! It's all your fault!" she declared, leaping to her feet.

Her physics books were by now forgotten, her mind taken over by the image of Brad and Emma. Her room was suddenly suffocating. Alex ran up and down the stairs to let off steam. When she stopped, she found herself in her father's study. She looked around as though it was her first time there: the desk was next to the window with the first computer on it, the surface piled up with papers. The other one was in the shadows on an isolated table. Two walls were covered with bookcases filled mainly with scientific texts. Her father was still a great fan of printed texts.

"Ah, of course! Physics everywhere, in here," exploded Alex.

She picked up a heavy tome. "*Elements of modern physics*," she read out loud. "An international best seller, no doubt!"

She dropped the book on the floor; she picked up another and did the same again. Then another and another. After a couple of minutes, she turned and saw the books strewn across the floor. An immediate pang of guilt overcame her for perhaps damaging them. She bent



down to gather them all up and felt stupid. She wanted to get revenge and couldn't. She stood there with the books in her arms, not knowing what to do with them.

"Horrible subject, how I hate you!" she said, torn between the urge to destroy one and the fear of ruining a single page. She carefully turned the pages of the first volume and saw that some of the pages were underlined in part. Bookmarks had been slipped in here and there. She moved them aimlessly from one chapter to another. "Sorry dad, I've lost the page. I'm afraid you'll have to read it all again," she said with a sense of evil vendetta.

She put the book back on the shelf and took down another. This time she didn't find any bookmarks, so she swapped the cover with that of a third book. She continued to feel wretched, sometimes even ridiculous, but she didn't stop. To feed her anger she clung to the idea losing an opportunity with Brad. She put the books that she had thrown on the floor back on the shelf, mixing them all up as much as she could whilst at the same time making it look perfect. It would take her father hours to find some of those texts.

*It's his own fault*, she kept saying to herself the whole time. She stood on tiptoes to reach the highest shelves. She was now grabbing books randomly, identifying them by feel. Suddenly, one almost fell on her head, much heavier than the others, and she accidentally caught it with the tip of her finger. It was a large tome, at least three times larger than a normal book and made with thick, hand-stitched pages. A modern reproduction of a medieval illustrated codex that had been recreated so well it looked centuries old, with perfectly yellowed and irregular cut pages. It must be worth a fortune. Alex turned the pages and admired the vivid gold leaf decorations. For a moment, her anger muted into astonishment.

*This is Ian's*, she guessed, running her fingers over the highly complex decorations. Even the text itself was decorative, written in a tight, perfect Gothic script. The words were so close together they were almost impossible to tell apart. Alex regretted not knowing Latin. She turned the pages one by one until she was almost halfway through the book. Between the columns of text, she saw illustrations of landscapes, cities, castles and portraits of men and women, all of whom wore solemn and aristocratic expressions. She was struck by one in particular. It was a young woman wearing a white dress embroidered with golden lilies. She had long curly blonde hair and the features of an angel. Alex concentrated on the sentences below the portraits, but she couldn't make them out. She only recognised the date written in Roman numerals, but she couldn't remember how to calculate the numbers. The only thing she was able to read was the name Isabel, or at least that's what it looked like.

"Whoever you are, you must have been magnificent," she said to the portrait.

A slip of paper fell from between the leaves to the floor. Alex set it on the desk and knelt down. It was a standard piece of white paper with Ian's elegant hand, written in fountain pen. The brief lines read:

**This book is *cursed* for me. I know I should destroy it but I can't. I'll leave it to you. Do what you will with it, but don't ever let me see it again. Better still if I know nothing more of it.**

Beneath those lines, in the corner, some different handwriting, Daniel's schematic style added:

**dfr274a / hyp45226**

Nothing more.

Alex looked at the book again, this time with ravenous curiosity. It wasn't like Uncle Ian to want to destroy a book, particularly if it was the reproduction of an ancient text, and a rather beautiful one at that. A print of that sort had to be a rarity, yet Ian never wanted to see it again and Daniel had hidden it carefully on a shelf.

Alex began to turn the illustrated in groups, skipping parts, hoping to find a clue that would give something away, but the book appeared to be the same all the way through: just Latin text, portraits and illustrations. Confused, she read the slip again and focused on the two incomprehensible words.

*They look like passwords*, she thought and looked up at the computer, especially at the one sitting alone at the end of the room. Since she was old enough to remember, it had always been there, in the corner. Despite it being a fossil from a hardware point of view, no one had ever mentioned getting rid of it. Indeed, no one except Daniel Freeland had ever touched it.

Alex had never taken much notice as she wouldn't know how to work such a museum piece.

She sat at the table. On the surface next to the monitor there were two old screens, with ear phones, two pairs of fibre optic gloves like the ones they still used in 3D simulators in home PCs. She looked at the slip again. It was a wild guess, but trying was so worth it. She sat and pressed the start button. The computer whirred quietly; very *retro*, that was the nicest term she could think of. After an eternity, the monitor displayed the manufacturer's logo. At the bottom, there was a tool bar as old as the hills and some standard icons for accessing

computer resources. The symbol of a small clock appeared and disappeared; finally, everything stopped, waiting for the user to hit a command. In the middle of the screen was an icon: a futuristic letter H over the word *Hyperversum Next*.

Alex knew that name. *Is there only one videogame in this computer?* She thought, astonished.

*Hyperversum* was a famous game, now at its fifteenth version in twenty years of production; a clamorous success in the world of virtual entertainment that had already made a billion dollars, and continued to top of the sales charts. The last version was called *Hyperversum Ultimate*, so the name *Hyperversum Next* indicated an older version, somewhere between the first and the most recent. Perhaps, after that version the game had become too evolved to work on the old computer and her father hadn't installed the others. Alex explored every file in that old heap of plastic, but eventually had to accept that nothing other than the videogame was installed on the computer.

The name *Hyperversum* stood for *hyper universum*: a system of virtual reality that could replicate all the environments in the world, and in history, and propose adventures in any scenario. With a 3D visor and a pair of fibre optic gloves the player could pretend to live in virtual worlds proposed by the computer, interpreting the role of any character one cared to create. Alex felt offended at the discovery: her father played an historical role game and had never told her anything. She clicked on the icon, started up the program. Luminous wording appeared on the screen:

## Hyperversum Next

System loading. Please wait...

Alex put on the gloves and the visor. As expected, a login appeared almost immediately in front of her eyes:

RESUME GAME

User name: daniel.freeland

User code: \_

Game code: \_

*"I wonder if standard voice commands work on this dinosaur,"* Alex thought, and pronounced the first of the two codes found on the slip of paper. For each letter or number she said, the cursor gave way to an asterisk. "Load game," she then said, when the system gave

her the option. The visor lit with a luminous countdown, it became dark, and then writing appeared:

System loaded.  
Game ready.

“Start” Alex commanded.

The darkness disappeared and an animated sequence appeared: the earth turned like a blue sphere in a starry space. At the top an alphanumeric counter advanced rapidly, alternating numbers and letters. The earth stopped at a specific point. The counter froze at the same time on the year: *1233 A.D.*

*Dad role plays with a medieval environment and then goes on at me if I go to a fantasy convention or show interest in swords and knights?* thought Alex, but then she remembered the illustrated codex on the table and realised that it was linked to the game: I wonder if it is the same historic period.

Suddenly the earth started to get bigger looking as though it was falling. Alex flew through clouds in the atmosphere and began to recognise the geography. She could identify Europe, then France and finally a region to the north-west of the country. The image stopped again. Medieval music gently played in the background that accompanied new flashing words:

Game ready to start.

Alex looked around again for a second or two, through the 3D visor. “Game statistics” she commanded. Nothing happened. “Help” she tried. A phosphorescent apple, fluctuating and floating, appeared on the visor. Alex realised it was an icon; she stretched out her gloved hand and touched the virtual apple. “Visualise players.” The apple changed color, it became yellow, radiating a more intense light, and showed numbers, letters and luminous diagrams in the air: the standard game statistics for any videogame.

Alex ignored the NPC list, non-playing characters, and among the playing characters found a single name: Daniel Freeland. He had an avatar that looked exactly like him, with the same name, build, appearance and his true age.

The description of the character was simply, “Knight”.

“Yes, the anonymous knight!” Alex exhorted.

Her father’s behavior towards her seemed increasingly unfair. It wasn’t true that they had nothing in common: they would have at least one thing, but he had always hidden it carefully from her. He had decided to exclude her from his little secret.

*Why?* Alex asked herself and the discovery hurt her more than the fight over her fail in physics. In an attempt to get that unbearable thought out of her mind, she started to change the parameters of the game. She introduced a new PC and chose its characteristics. It was easy because the commands were standard, just arranged differently on the screen. The avatar had appeared above a background of France and turned around, like a model that slowly acquired precise features.

The game had infinite libraries from which to select the characters details: lists of images for the shape of its eyes, its mouth; the shape of its nose, its hair and clothes, of which each item could be customized. Alex created a boy, who was the same age as her, with the same build and face. She called him Alex, as she gave him dark eyes and mahogany coloured hair. She decided he would be a squire and dressed him in rather anonymous grey clothes, and then she gave him a hat and gathered his long hair underneath it.

When she had finished, she was staring at a virtual duplicate of herself. It could have been her, dressed as a man, ready to go to another fantasy convention.

This last thought reminded her that her father hadn't wanted to take her. "You're so sad," she said to her virtual squire, though she knew that her pain was in her head and not in the image reflected back in the 3D visor. She tried to brighten the colors and modified the hood draped over his shoulders. She turned it a lovely intense blue, with a scallop-edged cape over his shoulders like the costumes in old Robin Hood films.

*He hasn't changed much*, she observed, yet the avatar's face had a lively expression and smiled like a reflection in the mirror.

"Alright, Alex the squire; let's go and explore Dad's secret medieval times."

A list indicated the parameters of the adventure:

City: Châtel-Argent  
Feud of Montmayeur  
Region: Picardy – Artois  
North-west France  
Country: France  
Date: May 7th 1233  
Time: 12:45:22

Apart from the year, the time and date were identical to reality; weird considering that the game had been off for a while. Theoretically, the game should have maintained the date registered the last time it was switched off; unless it was programmed to stay aligned with the computer clock.

*Playing with a game like this, with the real date and time is like jumping a few centuries back in time, thought Alex.*

“Where might you be, eight hundred years ago at this time of day?” she asked her alter ego.

*Not here at home alone, that’s for sure!* she replied to herself bitterly.

*Where would you like to be now? Well away from this place. Now, tomorrow, forever.*

She thought about her oral physics test for which she should start studying again sooner or later.

*Dad, you don’t deserve me doing this for you. No way am I going to be tested tomorrow. I’m going to go somewhere, just as I am going to in your game right now.*

She changed the date of the game setting to the next day. Out of pure spite she also changed the place, randomly choosing a spot further south in the French region.

“Start game.”

Once again, she fell towards her destination. The last thing she saw from high up was a small village in Picardy, surrounded by woods, then the 3D visor displayed:

Clois  
Feud of Ponthieu  
Picardy

The time counter began to run through minutes and seconds, starting from *May 8th 1233, at 12:48:58.*

*Phoenix, Arizona, United States of America*  
*May 7th, the near future, 13:08*

What a miserable game. Twenty minutes had passed and still nothing had happened. Initially, Alex had inquisitively observed every aspect of the medieval village so carefully recreated by the computer: the narrow streets lined with shops that were open and decorated for what looked like a day of celebration; street urchins playing in spaces between the houses; women sitting on doorsteps nursing new born babies or embroidering. Men walked to and fro along the streets, holding mules or horses by their bridles, some pulling carts. Preparations were underway at the church for the festival of the patron saint, and many men were wearing some kind of habit and dark cloak with a hood. Others wore grotesque masks and all of them carried fat candles in their hands.

It was all very picturesque, fine, but deadly boring for a videogame. Alex made her avatar wander around the village and couldn't see what her father saw in it that was so much fun. She sighed as she sat down on the step in front of a closed door, at the corner with a quieter street. With a couple of tiny moves of her finger inside the fibre optic gloves, she managed to make her avatar rest his elbows on his bent knees. It hadn't been difficult to learn how to move him; that version of *Hyperversum* was no different from many other 3D videogames and she had tried quite a few, so she manoeuvred herself confidently.

She had to admit that the virtual world in *Hyperversum* was truly realistic, much better than environments in considerably more modern videogames. It would have seemed completely real, if the player had also had a sense of feel, smell and taste, so it really was no surprise that the game had been so successful from the very first version. Nonetheless, the fact that nothing was happening made it even more frustrating.

Alex remembered she had changed the date and place of the game. Perhaps she had ended up in a neutral spot during a quiet moment: role videogames always had some, to give newbies an opportunity to learn how to use the characters without dying straight away. Unfortunately, she had forgotten the city her father had set in the original game couldn't be bothered to consult the statistics. She scanned the crowds to see if something gave her an idea, with no success.

A sound came from the end of the alley. A small group gathered near one of the last houses, built in rose-colored stone: four men, two on foot and two on horseback. The two on foot stood on either side of the front door. They looked like guards and Alex straightened up in hope. She didn't move, she studied the men from under her eyelashes with her face facing downwards at the ground, and noticed that they wore long dark cloaks, like the religious men in the patron saint procession, but they had an air about them that was quite aggressive as they looked around. She tried to see their faces but couldn't manage because they were standing with their backs to her or with their hoods pulled over their foreheads. The last to get off his horse turned for an instant but showed only the harsh lines of a leather mask. He wasn't wearing a habit under his cloak but dark clothes and a sword.

*Finally. My adventure,* thought Alex, pretending to be disinterested in the scene. The two who had arrived on horseback entered the house. The other two stayed outside guarding the door; they were not concerned about the presence of Alex's avatar, deeming it innocuous or perhaps thinking that it was asleep in the shadows of the doorway. A farmer with a mule loaded with sacks turned into the street from the main road and suddenly the two guards pretended to chat so as to look inconspicuous and Alex saw an opportunity. She simulated being stirred by the passing farmer and his animal, stood up and walked over to the opposite side of the road to the shady figures. When she had turned the corner, she looked around down the road and found a street that was parallel to the previous one. She hastened along it until she identified the back of the pink house. The building only had two windows on this side, on the mezzanine floor, both with no glass and the blinds raised.

Alex smiled. The surface of the wall was irregular with great gaps between one stone and another: child's play for anyone who did free climbing at almost the highest level of difficulty. And clearly, that ability had been one of the first characteristics she had attributed to her avatar when she created him, to spite the prohibitions her parents imposed on her in real life.

*Let's go and see what our Mr Xs are up to.*

It took her a couple of minutes to climb up. She came to a window ledge and pulled herself onto it.

*An exemplary climb, if only she could do the same thing in real life.*

She entered a large deserted room that was full of wardrobes and shelves. The open shelves were stacked untidily with parchments, packages, small bottles and small sackcloth bags, empty containers and piles of terracotta bowls. On the other side of the room was a closed door.



*It looks like a laboratory*, Alex observed. Her suspicion was confirmed when she found a mortar and pestle and a small set of weighing scales. Upon spotting dried herbs, colorful powders and small mummified animals inside closed pots, she realised she was inside a room which belonged either to a scholar or an apothecary. Books lay open on the table with eye-catching illustrations of plants and herbs.

The room was dominated by a shabby wooden table which sat in the center, papers strewn across it, open volumes, an unlit lamp and a small wooden chest, which contained several layers of small glass bottles that were sealed with a cork or with wax. Each was rolled in a layer of dried leaves, possibly to avoid them being damaged during transport. Alex's avatar picked one up and took off the leaves to glimpse inside: it was filled with a colourless liquid that resembled nothing more than water.

Street noises came in from the left, through a little window between two heavy wardrobes, which looked over the wooden roofs of the shops at the end of the street. Looking down Alex noticed many people shopping on the street, coming and going, a group of women chatting, and a tall boy with a hood who was leading a chestnut horse with a pale mane.

Voices outside the door. Someone was coming. The lock sprang.

Alex guessed she didn't have enough time to wrap the bottle back up in its leaves and return it to its place. She slipped everything into the pouch hanging from her belt, hoping that no one would notice it was missing; she shut the chest and looked for a hiding place. She was lucky: one of the two wardrobes was half empty and had no shelves inside it. The avatar just had enough time to squeeze in before the door to the room opened.

*Now it's getting exciting.*

Alex's heart was thumping hard despite the adventure being merely virtual. She controlled the avatar so he would peek through the keyhole and through his eyes she watched what was going on in the room.

The first to come in was a short fat man, dressed with crumpled but pretentious clothes. He was wearing a brocade hat on his bald head; he had large heifer-like eyes and a greasy face. He must have been the apothecary, as it was he who carried the house keys. Behind him were the two men who had arrived on their horses with the guards. The first pulled back his hood almost immediately, revealing a long, pointed face, dark shoulder-length hair. The other kept on his hood and mask. There was no gap in the leather for his mouth, maybe to muffle his voice.

The apothecary led his guests to the table and put his hand on the chest. "*Voilà, monsieur,*" he said in French to the man with the mask. "*À l'heure, comme j'avais promis.*"

Alex noted that the *Hyperversum Next* game didn't translate the main dialogues, as well as the background voices. Her father had not set the language into English, but he'd left the NPCs to speak the language of the country in which the adventure unravelled.

*Does he do that to practice?* she asked herself. In any case, she was pleased at her ability in the language she loved so much, because she understood every word with no trouble whatsoever.

The man with the mask had picked up a bottle to scrutinise the contents. "Are you certain it will work?" he enquired sternly, again in French. "I do not intend to run any risks with your strange concoctions."

"It will work, I assure you," replied the apothecary and a sly smile pulled at his lips.

"You have seen how it works."

"And should it not suffice?" the third man demanded. "Should he not die straight away?"

Alex held her breath.

"A serious injury would be enough, I'll do the rest," replied the masked man. "Doctors make mistakes and not always do they save the lives of injured men. Some unforeseen complication during treatment will remove the problem, even if the potion fails."

He wrapped the little bottle back up in the leaves and set it down in the chest, and closed the lid.

"I can't wait any longer. I have to get rid of him while he is young and heirless. In a few months' time the opportunity may not arise again."

His chaperone remained silent.

The apothecary listened unperturbed.

"You are truly ingenious, sir, let me say," he exclaimed.

"Whoever your victim is, I'm certain that no one will realise what has really happened. You will be lethal and leave no trace. Everyone will think it was an accident."

The man with the mask warned him, "Remember that you have never seen me".

"Of course, sir. You will have noticed that I never ask my clients any questions, not even when they arrive in anonymity like you. As far as I am concerned, no one ever asked me for those bottles."

The masked man appeared to be convinced. "Pay this man," he commanded his chaperone. He hid the chest under his cloak and left.

The apothecary bowed low, but rubbed his hands as he waited for payment. A third man, with a stony expression, went to his side and before he could straighten up again he took out a knife and slit his throat.

Alex covered her mouth with her hand.

The apothecary fell to the floor, his eyes wide open, staring at his assassin. He moved his lips but only made a gurgling noise. Blood spurted everywhere as the body convulsed in its final death throes. Alex smelled the acrid odor and felt the urge to vomit. She was suddenly overwhelmed by vertigo. She immediately became aware of her perceptions.

She really did smell the blood and the chemicals in that room. She touched the wardrobe door and her fingers felt rough wood. The weight of her body began to make her folded legs hurt. She carried her hands to her face. The 3D visor was no longer there. Her astonishment gave way to panic. Alex pressed her hands against the walls and felt herself suffocating. She was a prisoner in a real wardrobe, in a room where a murder had just been committed.

*Clois, North-West France*

*8 May 1233, between the sixth hour and the ninth hour*

For the first few fractions of a second, she felt paralysed; her heart was lodged in her throat, barely allowing her to breathe. She would have screamed, but terror held her back.

The wardrobe stank of chemicals. Alex felt the walls, wishing they would disappear from beneath her touch; the wood, however, remained horribly tangible. She looked at herself and found that she was dressed like her avatar. Even her hair was gathered under her cap.

Whatever had happened, the game had become reality. Everything around her had lost the scanty sheen of artificiality that was so typical of 3D reconstruction, and had acquired the look of reality.

*No, it can't have happened! I don't believe it!* Alex thought.

A sound, outside, reminded her that she was not alone; that a man had had his throat slit just a few feet away. It was as if a million ice needles were pricking her skin at the mere idea.

If the murderer were to find her in the wardrobe...

Afraid of making the slightest noise, Alex placed her eye against the keyhole again, trying with all her might to keep her shaking body under control.

The apothecary was still, lying in a slimy, red pool. The assassin had bent over the body to wipe his knife on the dead man's clothes. When he had finished, he fumbled with the oil lamp on the table. He opened its tank, emptied the contents onto the papers and books and set them alight. He waited for them to turn to ash before leaving.

Alex leapt from the wardrobe, unable to stay shut in there a moment longer. She found herself at the feet of the cadaver and hesitated, not finding the courage to step over it to reach the window through which she had entered. The puddle of blood slowly crept out further, almost touching her leather boots. Alex stepped backwards and bumped into the wardrobe door, which made a thump. Caught unawares by the collision, she screamed. The door was thrown open and there the assassin stood, drawn by the noise.

The man looked at her in astonishment. “And who the hell are you?” He extracted a dagger and thrust himself forward. Screaming, Alex ran to the little window between the two wardrobes. She glanced down at the roof of the next building. She jumped over the window ledge just in the nick of time, as the assassin’s hand reached out to touch the blue hood that was bellowing over her cap.

She landed on her feet and felt a sharp pain rip through her ankles. Then the wooden roof split under her boots and she slid to the edge. She was thrown onto her side and managed to pull herself back up just in time, digging her nails into the sloping surface so as not to drop over the edge to the ground. The assassin, had also climbed through the window and was now coming down towards her, crouching low so as not to slip. He was still carrying his dagger. Alex crawled along the roof, splinters piercing her all over, but once again she succeeded in getting to her feet and escaping the man.

Inexplicably, she maintained her balance long enough to escape. The assassin swore, his foot went through the roof and he wasted time freeing himself. Alex gained some ground. *Don’t look down! Don’t look down!* she repeated to herself as her stomach flip-flopped. The roof was coming to an end. On the other side of the alleyway, another roof continued. Alex took a run up and leapt over the gap. Too short. She missed the surface with her feet, hit her knees and elbows and slid downwards. There was nowhere for her to grip, just emptiness. She plummeted into a pile of vegetable baskets, half of which fell on top of her. The crash almost knocked her out.

Everything around her started to move suddenly, chaotic shouting and noises mixed with squeaking wheels and a whinnying horse. Alex tried to hold on to something so as not to be thrown out of the moving thing that she had fallen into, engulfing her in a wave of all kinds of vegetables. When a good part of the vegetables had rolled off, she realised she was in a cart that was travelling at top speed along the cobbled street.

Marc couldn’t believe his eyes. Someone who had dropped off a roof had just stolen his horse along with the greengrocer’s cart. It had all been so sudden that he hadn’t had time to react. He had been buying a few carrots for Cimbre and had just looked up when he heard a noise on the roof that overhung the market stalls. A second later the cart was racing madly along the road with Cimbre still tied to its side. Marc, sitting in the dust on the ground, hadn’t been able to do anything other than watch the scene of panic amongst the crowd and the vegetables strewn across the road.

He leapt to his feet rattling off all the foul language he knew. The stall owner was shouting about all the goods he had lost and was pointing after the disappearing cart, then at Marc who was the owner of the other stolen horse; a number of armed men wearing dark clothes were gathering at the corner of the street. Before long someone would have called the village guards. *If they recognise me, my father will send me directly back to the monastery and this time it'll be to take my vows*, thought Marc in a flash. He ignored the merchant who continued to point at him, and he hastily slid away into the crowd before anyone could stop him. He turned into a side street, ran to the end and then turned into another alley. He didn't even stop when he was certain he had lost everyone, and he took a short cut to the yard behind the church. The cart had gone along a road that came out in the same place, but only after a large curve that would allow him a precious opportunity to catch up. Despite the animals running faster, he could reach the church almost at the same time as the thief, before the road that led away from the village and into the woods.

He was also counting on Cimbre's intelligence: once over the initial moment of terror, the beast wouldn't tolerate anyone other than his master riding him; Marc was certain it would attempt to free itself and reach a familiar spot.

Marc was pretty sure he would find his horse back at the drinking trough behind the church.

Alex screamed as the cart lost a wheel, the last baskets of vegetables flew into the air behind it. She too rolled into the dust and landed face down, coughing. She rubbed the dirt out of her eyes and saw a dark horse run off, pulling the rest of the cart behind it. The second horse, a chestnut, snapped the knot that had tied it to the side and stood pawing the ground in the open space around them. A sharp whistle called him quickly back. Alex heard a male voice, but she was too confused to understand what it was saying. Someone strode over towards her, and then came the metallic sound of a blade being taken out of a sheath. Alex was able to turn onto her back and, against the light, she saw the profile of a hooded man pointing a sword in her face.

"Damned thief, you stole my horse!"

Alex raised her arms in a feeble gesture of defence. "Don't kill me! I didn't mean to, I swear I didn't mean to!"

The stranger seemed taken aback. "But you're just a boy! Foreign, to boot!" he declared. "Show yourself," he then commanded.

Very slowly, Alex lowered her arms, the sword still pointing at her face: in front of her stood a tall boy, barely older than herself, rather than the man she had initially imagined. His

hood cast a shadow which hid his face, but his sword was indisputably dangerous, and he appeared quite ready to use it.

“Please don’t kill me,” repeated Alex.

He searched her dusty face, her tilted cap and dark ruffled fringe.

“You’re hardly more than a boy; you haven’t even got a beard and you want to be a thief, to steal my horse from me! I should take you to the executioner personally, perhaps he’d put you off wanting to grow up into thief.”

Seeing the tip of the sword at the end of her nose, Alex again covered her head with her hands.

“I didn’t mean to steal: it was an accident! I’m not a thief! Don’t hurt me!”

“An accident! So, you’re a liar as well as a thief.”

“It’s the truth! The roof was steep and I ...”

“...Fell off like a baby bird! How convenient that you fell onto the merchant’s cart!”

“But it’s true! Don’t hurt me!” Alex curled up as tightly as she could, expecting to feel that sharp blade at any moment. It was just a few centimetres from her skin. The boy grimaced, reflected a while and finally lowered his sword.

“Perhaps you’re right: you’re not a real thief. With your courage you wouldn’t even be able to steal a lost hen.” He whistled a second time and his horse walked over to him, shaking his blonde mane.

“Get lost and thank heaven that I have mercy on little things like you.”

Alex spied on him cautiously from under her raised arms, and she saw him mount his horse. Incredulous, she realised that he was going to let her go.

“You’d better disappear fast,” he suggested. “They won’t be as kind as me. Run if you really don’t want to feel the executioner’s lash.”

A fierce group of people was approaching quickly from the wide road.

They were shouting; some were waving sticks. Alex realised that they were coming for her, to punish the thief and because of the chaos at the market. The apothecary’s assassin could be among them.

She jumped to her feet. The chestnut horse and its master were already far away. She looked at the people hurrying towards her.

No, this is ridiculous! This game has to end!

“Exit game!” she ordered out loud.

Nothing happened.

“End game! Emergency exit!” Alex commanded in a single breath.

The crowd came closer. Even running wouldn't help much now.

"Help!" Alex called in English.

Nothing.

"Help!" Alex screamed with all the voice she had left.

Marc turned around. He had been able to recognise the language of Englishmen since he was a boy and understood that the thief was calling for assistance.

Unbelievably, he saw the boy still standing in the clearing.

The crowd was almost upon him.

"What an idiot," he cursed under his breath. He hesitated for a split second then decided to act on instinct, as he did all too often. He galloped back; reached the little thief and grabbed the back of his tunic. "Jump up you idiot!"

The boy tried to climb onto Cimbre, but couldn't. Marc lifted him off his feet and threw him over the saddle like a sack of flour, just before a stocky villager carrying a stick was about to seize him.

"Away from here!"

Cimbre lurched forward and galloped off, carrying the two boys away from the crowd.