

Hyperversum Ultimate
(Hyperversum Ultimate)

by

Cecilia Randall

Excerpt: Prologue & Chapter 1
English translation 2017 by Brett Auerbach-Lynn

Front Cover

Cecilia Randall

Hyperversum Ultimate

The world of *Hyperversum* is back - the hit saga that has sold over 200,000 copies.

Front Flap

Phoenix, Arizona. The near future. Alex has made up her mind: she's going back to the Middle Ages and to Marc, who is now first knight to King Louis IX of France. Nothing can make her renounce her love for him, not even her father Daniel's anger and the pain of having to leave her family behind.

Châtel-Argent, northeastern France, the 13th century. While inside the castle the celebrations for Michel de Ponthieu's wedding are in full swing, Marc and Alex are reunited and decide to get married. But Ian forces them to delay for six months so they have a chance to get to know one another better.

In the two years they've been apart, Marc has changed. He's become a man of the court and a champion in battle, more self-assured, almost arrogant. Sometimes it seems to Alex like she doesn't know him anymore, she feels lost, and more and more often she ends up confiding in young Richard, with whom she seems to have much more in common. Things become even more complicated when Louis IX entrusts Marc with a delicate mission whose failure could lead to war: in Dunkerque a Knight Templar has been murdered, and the assassins must be found ...

Cover Illustration: Daniele Gaspari

Back Flap

About the Author

Cecilia Randall, a native of Modena, has a passion for adventure novels and films of all sorts - from Fantasy to Mystery to Science Fiction - as well as comics and cartoons, archaeology, history, and role-playing games. It was these interests that inspired the creation of the *Hyperversum* saga, an extraordinary success that's made her a household name with more than 200,000 copies sold. Giunti has published *Hyperversum I* (2006), *Hyperversum II – Il Falco e Il Leone* (2007), and *Hyperversum III – Il Cavaliere del Tempo* (2009). After *Gens Arcana* (2010), an adventure set in the Florence of Lorenzo the Magnificent, and *Millennio di fuoco*, a diptych composed of the volumes *Seija* (2013) and *Raivo* (2014), both with Mondadori, she returned to her most popular narrative universe with *Hyperversum Next* (2016), a stand-alone volume that can be fully enjoyed even by readers entering this world for the first time.

Her official website is: www.ceciliarandall.it

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Also available in e-book.

Book Design by Daniele Gaspari

Back Cover

“You shouldn’t be here. And I’m not just saying that because it’s cold.”

The voice reached Alex from behind. She closed her eyes for a moment, remembering when she’d heard similar words two years before in a different castle, during a different banquet. But this time it wasn’t Marc who had come out to the walls to find her. It was Richard Martewall.

WHAT READERS HAVE SAID ABOUT *HYPERVERSUM NEXT*

“... an multisensory reading experience in which not only are the images vivid, but we can almost hear the noises, smell the smells, and feel the sensations.”

From the blog *Life Style Made in Italy*

“*Next* is action and mystery, the battles are thrilling, dynamic, almost cinematographic, and they keep the reader breathless and completely immersed.”

From the blog *YouKid*

“... it’s a whirlwind of action, adventure and surprises. This book is fantastic. I sure hope there’ll be others, but who knows?”

From the blog *Leggere è ... Sognare*

Prologue

*Domain of Martagne, northeastern France
28 November 1234, sixth hour*

It's always cold on the battlefield, or at least that's how Marc felt every time a battle ended and he found himself breathless and covered in sweat, counting the dead bodies that lay motionless on the bloodstained ground.

To make things worse, it was raining. It had begun with a light drizzle as the army of King Louis and that of the northern rebels charged at one another, colliding in a great tumult of horses and men, and now the rain was pouring down on helmets and shields, filling the hoof prints with slimy mud and making its way beneath the warriors' armor. Marc felt the drops slide icily through his aventail and down his neck.

Eighteen dead: five of his men and thirteen of the enemy. He had carried out the mission that King Louis had given him, and with relatively few losses, but he felt little satisfaction. Losing even a single one of his men was always a terrible burden on his heart. After two years as first knight to the king he was not yet numbed to the consequences of war, and in his heart he hoped he never would be, even if that meant feeling his stomach shrivel up to the size of a walnut and a deep cold invade his aching muscles every time the fighting was through.

"My lord, there is the Baron de Martagne," announced one of his lieutenants who arrived at a slow trot. He pointed to a solitary figure at the foot of the slope on the other side of the battlefield. While the king's soldiers were already rounding up and disarming the defeated rebels, one adversary remained unvanquished, refusing to relinquish his weapons and prepared to butcher anyone who dared approach. Three of the five dead among the royal troops had fallen at hand of this one man, the first of them the messenger sent to negotiate.

"I'll deal with him," replied Marc, adjusting his grip on his sword and shield. Throughout the battle he had kept an eye on that knight with the livery and the shield adorned with blue-and-white lozenges, the symbol of the enemy leader. Baron Reynart de Martagne was twice his age and had twice as much combat experience, but neither of these facts had helped him to victory, despite being able to count on at least twenty more men.

Today experience loses out to audacity, Marc thought, but more than anything he was angry.

That senseless clash should never have taken place. Weeks had already passed since Pierre Mauclerc, head of the rebellion against King Louis fomented by Henry III of England, had agreed to lay down his arms and recognize the authority of the throne in Paris. The only one who would not hear of submitting was Reynart de Martagne, stubborn and impudent in the face of Louis IX's divinely sanctioned sovereignty. He was all alone and yet refused to lay down his arms, forcing the king to send his first knight to settle the matter, at the price of more blood and more useless deaths.

But now we're going to end this once and for all, Marc said to himself and spurred Goth towards the enemy. The black steed shook his great head, whinnied, and didn't hesitate, eager to set off once more and taste the excitement of a new clash. As Marc closed in on the Baron de Martagne, a tense silence descended over the battlefield. Everyone, victors and vanquished, stopped what they were doing and silently observed the final duel.

Marc brought Goth to a halt roughly ten paces from Reynart de Martagne and turned just enough to display the horse's left flank and his shield, where the golden lily of France sparkled above the falcon and the lambel on the light-blue pale of his coat of arms. "*Monsieur de Martagne!*" he yelled out so that everyone could hear him. "I, Marc de Montmayeur, first knight of His Majesty Louis IX Capet, order you to lay down your arms and surrender. You still have a chance to save your life, thanks to the mercy of the king, if you publically recognize his authority and submit to it. But if you do not, I will be forced to hand you over to the sheriffs as a traitor to the Crown, and then you could end up before the executioner."

Martagne gave no sign of lowering his sword, which was covered in blood up to the hilt. "First you'll have to defeat me, boy," he roared. "I want to see what you're made of."

Underneath his helmet, Marc grimaced in consternation. "Why do you force me to shed more blood? The battle is over and so is your rebellion. What can you possibly hope to gain from this foolish duel? Heed my words: surrender and thank the heavens for the king's generosity. You're all alone and you've been defeated, only your pride keeps you from conceding."

"We'll talk it over after I've killed you!" Martagne dug his spurs into his horse's flanks and charged.

Marc awaited his arrival, raising his arm to meet his opponent's sword with his shield. He gritted his teeth for impact, then repulsed the enemy blade and disengaged. He shifted Goth into a more favorable position and then responded with a similar attack, which was parried by the

baron's blade. Marc slashed again, first from the right and then from the left, and then attempted to take advantage of an opening in Martagne's defense when he overextended his arm. The tip of Marc's sword pierced his opponent's blue-and-white surcoat, but was unable to penetrate the underlying chain mail. Martagne groaned in pain, then successfully dodged yet another blow.

Marc tried to catch his breath, the smell of mud, iron, and wet leather in his nostrils and sweat burning his eyes. Baron Reynart was a skilled warrior, he had to admit: shorter than Marc in stature, but with arms and shoulders of equal strength and an agility uncompromised by age. It would not be easy to defeat him. Yet he had to, and quickly. The rebels might take heart if they saw the king's first knight forced into a corner, and if they did then there were more than enough of them to try to overwhelm the royal soldiers and reopen the conflict.

Marc charged again, accompanied by a rumbling of thunder in the leaden sky. Just as dark was the echo of their swords clashing together. The two contenders ceaselessly exchanged blows as their steeds continued to circle, every bit as ferocious as their masters as they pursued each other through the muck that now covered the entire battlefield.

With each new attack from his adversary, Marc felt more and more pain in his right arm. Each blow of the sword against his shield shook him down to his shoulder blade, and each time he was slower than the time before, but Marc knew that Martagne would be feeling no less exhausted. When the baron raised his sword to attack, Marc suddenly opened up with his shield and slammed it horizontally into his enemy's chest. It struck him directly in the ribs, drawing a suffocated cry. For the first time the baron wavered on his saddle and Marc wasted no time chasing after him, but he was unable to drive home another blow. Martagne was not to be surprised again. Indeed, thanks to his experience, he anticipated the trajectory of Marc's next thrust and turned it back against his opponent, slipping under his extended blade to gash his right thigh with the tip of his sword.

Marc felt a finger of fire crawl across his flesh, and he contracted all his muscles to avoid losing his balance because of the pain. Now he was truly enraged. He incited Goth with a cry and let go of the reins. In a mounted duel the most important thing was one's skill in guiding the animal, and Marc had yet to meet anyone who had as good an understanding with his horse as he did with Goth. They had trained countless hours to be able to understand each other with the slightest body movements, the simplest sounds.

Goth charged straight at the other horse's right flank, then turned sideways just prior to ramming into him. With both hands free, Marc blocked Martagne's sword with his shield, then stood up on his stirrups and slashed with his own blade in a directly blow to his opponent's helmet with all the strength he could muster. The force of the impact unsaddled Martagne and flung him down into the mud.

Cries of celebration or, in the case of the rebels, of rage and desperation from the onlookers shattered the silence. While his men chanted his name and the vanquished insulted him, Marc pointed his sword at Martagne. "I'll tell you one last time," he declared. "Surrender and demonstrate your submission to the king, and your life will be spared."

The baron had risen to his knees, shaking his head after the violent blow, but he immediately planted his sword in the mud and used it to rise to his feet. "We're not finished yet!" he yelled and rushed forward. Marc brought Goth up on his hind legs, just in time to avoid his horse getting stabbed in the neck. While the horse was still neighing and whinnying, he led him to a safe distance. "Bastard!" he roared.

There was no greater misconduct in a duel than a surprise attack against your enemy's horse, but there was no greater crime of any kind than going after *his* horse. Marc leaped down off of Goth because honor required he fight a grounded enemy on equal terms, but he would have liked to strangle Martagne with his bare hands.

He lunged forward on the offensive. Martagne dodged the first blow, then deflected the next one aimed at his belly with a sweep of his sword. The two blades clanged together and then disengaged. Marc backed a few steps away from his opponent, circling and studying him, while the baron turned slowly around to keep his adversary in front of him.

Then Martagne took the initiative, attempting a thrust with the tip of his blade. He aimed for the ribs, then the side, then the chest; Marc was ever-ready to parry, and the two blades continued to clash for what seemed like forever, but without doing any damage.

Enough is enough, Marc decided through gritted teeth. He waited for Martagne to come at him again. Their blades crossed once more, first low, then high. As soon as Martagne lunged forward with both hands on the hilt of his sword, Marc freed his blade, took one step forward to bring himself alongside his opponent, and then slashed him across the back.

The blade shrieked as it cut through cloth and chain mail, entering the flesh. Martagne screamed and fell to his knees. With a kick from behind Marc knocked him down on his face.

Martagne succeeded in turning over on an elbow and still had his sword in hand, but when he saw his opponent ready to strike again he threw his weapon off to the side and yelled, “I surrender! I submit to His Majesty King Louis!”

Marc clamped his jaw shut and withheld his attack, unable to do otherwise. If he had been able to disarm the baron before he’d spoken, he would have had every right to drag him away in chains to be tried for treason and felony. But now, by order of the king, he was obliged to show mercy.

He forced himself to lower his sword. “I take note of your repentance, *monsieur*,” he said, knowing full well that the baron’s declaration was merely one of convenience to save his neck. He would have bet half his territories that the baron would take up arms again the first chance he got. “Then you agree to serve our sovereign loyally and to obey his authority?”

“I agree,” replied Martagne, with the tone of someone being forced to swallow poison.

“Then you will accept the orders of the king’s first knight, who speaks with the authority granted on this occasion by His Majesty in person,” Marc continued. “From this moment on, your feudal domain and all your family’s lands will pass under the control of your son-in-law, *monsieur* Sébastien de Narbes, who has always remained loyal to our sovereign.” He pointed to the knight in the red-and-green livery, stonily observing the scene alongside the king’s officials. “And as for you, I sentence you to six months of exile outside the king’s territories. During this period you will not step foot in France for any reason, nor have any contact with those who live there. Transgress even once, and I will personally drag you in front of the executioner, do you understand?”

The reply from beneath Martagne’s helmet was a genuine hiss of fury. “Yes, I understand.”

“Then get up and get out of my sight.” Marc sheathed his sword and strode back to Goth. He climbed back in the saddle and waited for Martagne to do the same, in the humiliated silence of all his knights and soldiers. The baron neither looked at nor spoke to anyone before departing, least of all his son-in-law, but he made sure to pass alongside Marc. “This doesn’t end here. You’ll pay for this, I swear,” he quietly hissed so as not to be heard by others.

Marc could see the cruel sparkle in his eyes through the slit of his helmet, but the threat only served to deepen his own anger. “Disappear, before I get the urge to throw you back in the mud where you belong.”

The baron said no more and set off at a gallop.

Marc watched him vanish beyond the rise. He took off his helmet and went back to be greeted by his men's ovations, but they weren't able to brighten his mood. The rain had nearly stopped, but he was soaking wet, aching, and couldn't wait to lie down somewhere wrapped up in a dry blanket.

He gave his officials the necessary instructions for handling the prisoners, who would have to pay a ransom for their freedom that varied according to their social station; he congratulated Sébastien de Narbes, who had just become the new lord of Martagne in place of his traitorous father-in-law; finally, he reached his squire, Théo, who awaited him near the baggage train.

"Is that wound serious?" the squire asked, pointing first to the bloody slash on his right thigh.

Marc shook his head. "No, just a scratch. I can hardly feel it, stitches shouldn't be necessary."

"Still, better to disinfect it as soon as possible," the squire concluded. "And with this rain, I'd better dry off the chain mail right away and get everything oiled."

Marc thought about the long hours required to roll each individual piece of the armor in a barrel full of sand to prevent rust. It was an awful job, one which he himself had done a thousand times during his time as squire, but Théo didn't seem the least bit bothered. "A flawless victory, my lord," he continued as he took the shield and helmet into his care. "The king and, above all, your father will be quite satisfied with you." He spoke with the same enthusiasm he would have displayed had the just-concluded struggle been nothing more than a simple training duel.

Marc sighed, envying his squire's composure, and cleared the sticky black hair drenched in sweat from in front of his face. His cheeks prickled with the beard he hadn't had time to shave.

Théo was twenty-two years old - two years older than him - not of noble birth, and still a squire only because his father needed more time to save the money necessary to buy him the very expensive *adoubement* a knight required. He had more experience serving in war than his young lord and far more discipline, which he had learned from his previous mentor, the elderly Baron de Guines, now retired to private life. Marc suspected that these very qualities had put him at the top of the list of candidates when Count Jean Marc de Ponthieu had had to choose a squire for his newly knighted son.

My father hopes I'll learn something from him, since he certainly can't learn much from me, Marc said to himself with his usual resignation. His anger was now fading and exhaustion was setting in; his thoughts lined up in his mind and he reviewed the events of the day in search of some source of reassurance. Despite the two years he'd spent honorably serving the king, the

cocky first knight Marc de Ponthieu - now Marc de Courmayeur – still secretly feared not being able to meet people’s expectations, and especially those of his father, the legendary “Silver Falcon.”

“I certainly hope they’re all satisfied,” he replied, getting off his horse. His wounded thigh sent a brief stab of pain. “But most of all, I hope that the rebellion has been quelled once and for all. Enough fighting amongst ourselves, enough wasting lives and resources. I want to go home.”

“It’s unlikely there will be other battles, at least this winter,” Théo said as they set off walking towards the covered wagon that offered shelter from the rain. “We’ve already seen the first snow in the mountain pass, and it won’t be long before it starts snowing down in the lowlands as well.”

“One more reason to hurry home.” Marc stroked Goth’s neck, the horse moved docilely beside him, and mentally calculated the journey. Four days at most and they would reach Châtel-Argent. Home, finally. He hadn’t seen it in six months.

“You don’t want to spend the winter at court?” asked Théo. “Paris would surely offer more interesting pastimes and more company with whom to kill time on those dreary winter days.”

“I’ve had enough company for a while, I want to get some rest and I’ll never be able to if I’m constantly surrounded by a band of rowdy knights.”

Theo grinned. “There are the ladies as well.”

Marc shrugged. “Those can certainly wait until the spring; they’re even more wearisome than bored knights.”

He laughed with Théo, but deep down he felt the same sense of bitterness, resentment, and emptiness that gnawed at him every time his imagination allowed itself to be tempted by feminine charms.

Yes, the Parisian dames could certainly wait, for she most was not among them: the girl who had hurt him the most, who had humiliated him after leading him on and whom, despite everything, his heart had not ceased to pine for.

It will pass, Marc said himself, or, rather, hoped for about the thousandth time in the last year and a half. *She told me she would have no problem forgetting about me. I can do the same.*

But he certainly hadn’t expected it to take so long.

Chapter 1

Phoenix, Arizona, USA. *The Near Future.*
May 24th, 3:35 p.m.

She had been staring at the computer screen for at least a half an hour now, the 3-D visor in her hands and the medieval-style melody playing over and over in her ears. Beyond the closed door of the studio, there was absolute silence. The house seemed empty, but Alex knew that her father Daniel was still downstairs in the living room. Perhaps he was sitting on the couch, or he might be pacing back and forth across the room like a caged tiger, but he was certainly there, and the tension in the air after their latest argument was still electric.

Alex closed her eyes for a moment and sighed. She thought it would be easier. Of course, she knew her father wouldn't jump for joy when she told him she wanted to return to Marc, to the Middle Ages, and this time for good, but she wasn't expecting such a negative reaction, such a total and categorical refusal. For the first time in eighteen years they had had a *real* argument, and she'd used a phrase she never thought she'd hear herself say.

"I'm of legal age now, *you can't tell me what to do with my life anymore!*"

Alex rubbed the base of her nose with two fingers. Why had it come to that? Why was her father simply refusing to understand that she *had* to go back to Marc? She had dreamed about him for two years, regretting that she hadn't chosen to stay with him in the first place. She had been desperate when she thought she would never be able to see him again because the damn computer was broken and *Hyperversum Next* was no longer a functioning portal to the past, but merely a normal, useless role-playing game. Now that the miracle had repeated itself with *Hyperversum Ultimate*, the brand new version of the program, she couldn't let the chance go to waste. She couldn't say no to the destiny that was calling her for the second time.

She couldn't say no to Marc.

But the thought of her father's disapproval was a painful one.

Even her mom Jodie was saddened by her choice. She didn't want her to go "so far away," to such a "difficult" place, and Alex had understood exactly what she meant by those words. They had had to speak in allusions, since Gabe was always around while they were trying to talk things out.

Gabe: he was the only one who wasn't sad at his older sister's departure, but he still thought that she was going off to college, and that she was only leaving early so she could enjoy the summer on campus away from their parents. With a thirteen-year-old's exuberance, he couldn't wait to take over the soon-to-be-empty room and turn it into his own personal playground.

Alex shifted her gaze back to the monitor and the words that stood out there, bright against the dark background:

Hyperversum Ultimate

CONTINUE GAME?

user name: alex.freeland

user code:

game code:

Hyperversum had been waiting for her since the day before. All she had to do was log in and start the game.

I wish I had time to say a proper goodbye to everyone, she thought bitterly.

Instead her mom was out of the house with Gabe, whom she'd taken out with the excuse of needing to go shopping at the mall when she saw that the argument between Alex and Daniel was escalating.

Her dad was downstairs and would not be coming up to witness her departure.

Alex felt abandoned.

She gazed at the framed photograph she'd taken with her from her room for encouragement. Ian Maayrkas was smiling back at her and that smile, as always, helped cheer her up.

I've missed you too, Uncle. I'll finally get to see you again.

The thought gave her renewed energy. As long as she could remember, Ian had always been able to help her, finding solutions to problems that seemed insurmountable. The two of them understood each other perfectly, even if they only saw each other two or three times a year and weren't even actually related by blood. They were kindred souls, and now they were about to be united by the same life choice.

Yes, Ian could help her, she was sure of it. As soon as she saw him again and told him everything, he would advise her on the best thing to do to convince her father of her choice and,

most importantly, how to reassure him. With her ideas straight she would be able to make peace with her parents and sort things out.

I'm not saying goodbye forever to anyone right now. The game works the same as before. I can go, come back, and make things right.

She took a deep breath. Her decision was made. She'd waited long enough. She logged in and strapped on the visor and fiber-optic gloves. "Continue game," she said

A map of France suddenly appeared on the screen, rapidly enlarging as if the player were falling down toward it from a great height. Alex licked her lips in anticipation as she rushed virtually downwards toward her destination. She saw once more the green countryside of her past visit, the dense forests of firs and oaks, the crystal-clear river, and finally ... There it was. The castle built of light-colored stone, its crenellated towers surrounding the square dungeon, all protected by three sets of walls.

The last thing she saw from above were the white-and-blue standards with the silver falcon fluttering in the wind, together with those, red and gold, of the Count de Grandpré. In her visor she visualized:

Châtel-Argent
Domain of Montmayeur
Picardy – Artois

The timer began counting off minutes and seconds: time: *24 May 1235* – hour: *15:35:58*.

Alex found herself in the deserted lane from which she had departed the day before. For the moment she was still an avatar: she couldn't smell the smells, or touch or taste what her eyes saw. She wouldn't truly materialize in the Middle Ages until Marc came into her visual field. As absurd as it was, that's how it worked. Every time. A Freeland initiated the game and a Maayrkas gained access, as though the representatives of the two families were the keeper and the key to the portal to the Middle Ages.

How was it possible? Nobody knew. Her father Daniel had gone crazy for twenty years trying to solve the mystery and had nothing to show for it, but that didn't matter to Alex. She wasn't interested in knowing why *Hyperversum* worked that way; it was enough to know that the road was open to her, and that she could return to Marc. She just had to be careful not to appear to

him from out of nowhere like a ghost, since he didn't know the truth and mustn't find out at any cost.

Alex carefully guided her avatar down the lane to the intersection with the main road, where she peeked around the corner, keeping herself flush to the wall of the last house. Her heart was pounding, secretly fearing that Marc hadn't come to wait for her, that he'd changed his mind and no longer wanted to see her.

But there he was.

Astride his black steed he was watching the people coming and going around him, paying no attention to the small side street. He was wearing a different tunic from the day before, this one in various shades of brown, but he had the same silver jewel around his neck. His accessories, from his belt to his gloves to his boots, were of fine, expertly-worked leather befitting a noble lord, not to mention the brother of the groom.

The festivities for the marriage of Michel de Ponthieu and Célèste de Grandpré were still ongoing and would last for the canonical seven days: Alex was aware of it, but she was oblivious to the flower-laden window sills of the houses or the castle decorated for the occasion. She only had eyes for Marc, his black shoulder-length hair caressed by the breeze, his lips pursed in a hard line, his forehead furrowed in the effort to identify one of the town's inhabitants.

He's looking for me, Alex thought, and she felt an overwhelming sense of warmth fill her heart and infuse her cheeks.

A moment later the dizziness came. Alex groped for the wall of the house because all of sudden she was really there, in the Middle Ages, and the sensations previously inaccessible to her now slammed into her body and brain: under her fingers the rough-hewn stone warmed by the sun; in her nostrils the smell of clay, wood, smoke, flowers and iron; in her mouth the vague taste of dust. The full weight of her body now pushed down on her legs; the comfortable chair, the 3-D visor, and the gloves had disappeared.

Alex took a step forward and then stopped. She stayed at the corner of the lane, no longer hidden against the wall, and waited for Marc to notice her. She savored the moment in which he first caught sight of her, straightened his back, and immediately gave her his full attention, like a bird of prey preparing to strike.

She smiled at him from a distance.

Marc spurred his horse, making his way slowly through the crowd so as not to knock over anyone. He reached the side street but didn't dismount, first looking around in the distance and then at Alex, for so long and with such somber eyes that she instinctively held her breath.

Was he going to reject her? Had he come all the way over there just to tell her he didn't want to see her anymore?

Instead, Marc reached out his hand.

Alex grabbed it and was pulled up onto the saddle. Marc encircled her with his arms as he took hold of the reins and spurred on his charge. The horse trotted down the lane and continued along other equally solitary backroads, obeying his master docilely.

They were heading in the opposite direction of the castle and Alex wondered why, a thousand hypotheses swirling around in her head and not a single answer. Behind her Marc was tense - she could feel it when their bodies touched - and didn't say a word. Alex dared not be the one to break the silence, and the ideas in her head grew darker with each passing moment, until the horse finally reached the great fortified gate leading outside the castle walls. The soldiers on guard greeted the young lord with deference and asked no questions when he proceeded beneath the barbican stone vault.

"I was afraid you wouldn't come," Marc said suddenly, the sound of his voice startling Alex in the near-dark tunnel. "So was I," she replied, almost in a whisper.

"Once again you're alone. Where is your father?"

Alex asked herself why he was being so curt, but then she remembered. "Here, girls from good families usually don't walk around the city by themselves," Uncle Ian had told her during her previous sojourn, and she cursed herself for having forgotten. "My father's coming. He's not far behind," she lied, but wishing that her words might come true. She truly hoped her father would successfully follow her through *Hyperversum*. If only he could have spoken with Ian in person, things would have been so much easier.

Marc grunted incomprehensibly and fell silent.

They came out into the light and bypassed the moat. When the horse reached the dirt road on the other side of the drawbridge, Marc took hold of the reins with one hand and put his other hand around Alex's waist and held her tight. She opened her mouth but didn't have time to speak: Marc urged the horse on with a yell and he sprang forward, neighing triumphantly.

Alex screamed in surprise. The steed surged down the road at full gallop as though he didn't even feel the weight of his two riders, and further accelerated after abandoning the dirt road and cutting through the wild meadows beyond the wheat fields.

Alex grabbed onto the saddle and Marc's arm with all her strength, but soon all fear vanished and was replaced by euphoria. The wind whipped her face; the black horse, shimmering like silk, was pure energy, pure power. Alex began to laugh, intoxicated with adrenaline.

They raced like lightning in a green ocean dotted with poppies, daisies and buttercups, until they glimpsed a bend in the river that blocked their path. The horse slowed down, perhaps knowing that he couldn't go any further, and trotted easily toward to the riverbank, stopping less than five meters away. His breathing was only slightly accelerated, but Alex was panting as if she had been the one running all that time. Marc leaped to the ground and helped her to dismount, but he didn't let her feet touch down. He held her in his arms and then threw himself down on the grass with her.

They remained like that for several minutes, catching their breath side by side and gazing up at the clear sky and the butterflies fluttering just above their heads.

"It was ... incredible," Alex said finally.

Marc's reply came after a deep breath. "Yes, it truly was."

Alex stole a glance at him. He was smiling now, without the fraught expression he'd had earlier, and yet he was still keeping his distance. Alex understood his caution; she didn't want to force his hand, but at the same time she wanted to throw her arms around him so badly that it hurt just thinking about it. They were so close, but something still separated them. It was an infinitesimally short distance, Alex could feel it in her skin, just one tiny step, but he had to be the one to take it. It was his right after she had left him without any explanation and then vanished for two years.

Please, hurry, thought Alex. She was dying to discover with words, hands, and lips the young man into which the adolescent Marc she remembered had transformed. On his face was the shadow of a beard, and she found it irresistible.

She too had changed, grown up, matured. Was it possible that he wasn't in just as anxious to discover how different she was?

Marc pushed himself up on an elbow and nodded towards his horse, now intent on grazing a few meters away. "That's Goth. The best in our stables."

Disguising her anxiety as best she could, Alex sat up to look at the animal. She smoothed out her wrinkled dress. “The stock of your father’s steed, I imagine.”

Marc shook his head. “Actually, no. Hun produced two colts and my father destined one for me and one for King Louis, but they’re still too young and won’t be able to be ridden until they’re five years old. But Goth comes from the same bloodline. My father went personally to select him when he equipped me for knighthood.”

At the thought of Ian, Alex turned to look for the castle they’d left behind them. It seemed so tiny in the distance, but it was strange to think that Ian was really there, inside those walls, and no longer separated from her by an incomprehensible space-time barrier. “Is he well?” she asked, unable to avoid a pang of fear as she awaited the reply.

Everyone at home had asked themselves that question at least once, although they were always quick to reassure each other. The fact that *Hyperversum* stopped working after being transferred from the broken computer to the new one could have been the result of something that had happened to Ian in the meantime, something that had prevented him from being where Daniel had gone to look for him. Something very serious. Alex felt a secret chill.

“He’s quite well,” Marc chuckled. “He’s given up tournaments, the court, war, and says that now he can finally rest and enjoy the life of the feudal lord, but he grumbles about not being ready to become a grandfather so soon.”

A sigh of relief. Alex felt her heart lighten and thanked the heavens. With her worst fears banished, her voice took on a more playful, conversational tone. “Grandfather? You mean Michel is getting married because ...”

“No, that’s not it at all!” Marc had a brief laugh. “My brother has never made a single mistake even when it comes to far less important matters, so he certainly wasn’t going to slip up when something like that was concerned. No, he’s getting married out of love for his beautiful bride, but it won’t be long before we receive the good news of an heir on the way.”

Alex did a rapid calculation of Ian’s age and those of his children. “That’s true, if Michel becomes a father at eighteen ...” she began to say, but Marc continued what he’d been saying and didn’t hear her. “But I’ve realized that my father’s problem isn’t one of age. It’s that he didn’t expect Michel to be the one to produce the first heir. He expected it to be me. But despite all the trouble I’ve gotten into, I’ve never quite gotten around to it.”

Alex was motionless, her lips parted, incapable of replying. Marc was looking at her now with those blue eyes so intense they seemed like a piece of the sky, his smile vanished. “No woman up to now has *ever* been able to convince me to settle down,” he declared.

“I’ve never wanted to settle down either,” Alex murmured.

He moved closer, raising himself up on his arms and leaning towards her. “No man was ever worthy of your consideration?”

Their faces were practically touching. Alex felt Marc’s breath on her cheek. She had goosebumps. “None of them was you.”

“But you pushed me away when I made my move.” His lips were right next to hers.

Alex closed her eyes and the world around her disappeared. There was only Marc. “I was scared, I was stupid. I only realized that when it was too late.”

He took her cheek in his hand, coaxing her eyes open. “If you say yes to me now, I won’t let you leave again.”

There was something terrible in his tone, but Alex felt no fear. “I came back for you and I intend to stay, if you want me.”

Marc kissed her. A soft kiss initially, cautious perhaps, but Alex clearly felt a shockwave pulse through both of them, cancelling out all her doubts, all her fear. She threw her arms around him as he laid her on her back and took possession of her mouth, and that void that she’d felt in her soul for two years suddenly disappeared in a whirl of passion.

They rolled around in the grass, their bodies enlaced, until they were forced to catch their breath. Marc propped himself up on an elbow so as not to hurt her. He was so majestic, even with his hair disheveled and wildflowers stuck to his tunic, and Alex desired more than ever to be his forever.

“So you’ve chosen,” he said. “No more changing your mind, no more secrets.”

“No more secrets,” Alex lied again, uneasy. But she knew she had no choice. “Just let your father and my father talk it over, like I told you yesterday, and there won’t be any more problems.”

Let’s hope, she added to herself. She would fight with all her strength to prevent anything from ever separating her from Marc again, and she prayed that this one secret not become a burden on their future. Marc rose to his feet and reached out his hand to her again. His smile was triumphant. “Then let’s go announce it to the world.”