

## Chapter One

### Erin

Come on, dragon. Spit/Spout ice!

With one click, the imposing crystal dragon before me rises up on its hind legs, throws open its enormous jaws revealing icicle-armored teeth and – nothing. Not so much as a single snowflake.

“Shit.” I’ve been working on this for so long, and the ruler of my dragon world is still completely harmless. Apart from talons as long as your arm and the deadly tail, of course.

I sigh. What did I do wrong? I open the design program and start typing wildly on the keyboard. Somewhere I must have overlooked a bit of incorrect code.

“Erin!” A hissing sound startles me, and unfortunately everyone else in the game lab as well. I roll my eyes. Maya. She is standing by the closet and probably thinks she’s being completely inconspicuous. With her glossy black hair and flawless dark skin, she would have a hard time being inconspicuous, even if she weren’t waving her arms around like crazy.

“Erin, where are you, dammit?”

I look at the clock. Just before eight! “Shit, shit, shit.” I quickly grab my laptop, cell phone, and headset and race to the exit where I leap over the gate instead of waiting for Tom to open it.

He just sighs with resignation. “Have fun, whatever you’re doing.”

I smile my apology to him and then run to the exit alongside Maya.

“You only have four more hours, have you forgotten?” she asks in a pronounced singing tone. Her strong southern accent always comes out when she’s agitated.

“No! Well, yes. As you can see.”

She sighs. “Do you at least have something with you to put on? It will take too long to go back to the house now.”

With a crooked grin, I wave a hand from my head toward my feet. With a professional eye, Maya studies the ultrashort denim shorts that I’m wearing over knee-length leggings, the ankle boots and my Witcher t-shirt, and shakes her head. “Come with me.”

She drags me through the long hallways of the IT building and outside. In the warm light of the setting sun, the towers and gables of campus look like a castle in a fairy tale. Ancient ivy covers almost all the buildings, and only the climbing roses, just starting to bud now at the beginning of spring, try to compete with the ivy for space on the delicate gray walls. Even after six months I still haven’t gotten used to the fact that I’m allowed to be a student here.

“Erin!” Maya doesn’t allow me time to enjoy the moment. She rushes me up the enormous flight of steps into the building for physical education students, through the high, marbled entrance hall with projecting stairways and ornate college coat of arms into the dressing room to her locker and pulls out a partially see-through top.

I stare at it. “That’s what you wear to work out?”

She snorts. “More for afterwards. You never know what might happen. Here.”

I take off the Witcher shirt and pull on the soft, flowing silver top, which leaves nothing to the imagination. At least I happen to be wearing my prettiest bra. Maya seems to notice that too, because she doesn't look entirely dissatisfied. She hands me her eyeliner and mascara, and I quickly apply them both. Even her heavy-duty concealer can't mask the rings under my eyes due to the programming party last night, though.

"I constantly ask myself why this goddess thing doesn't come with an all-around beauty package," I murmur. "A little glitter here and there, supernatural beauty, you know. That would be incredibly practical."

She studies me and shrugs her shoulders. "I guess you can't expect Hades to think of something like that. So this will have to do."

"Wow, thanks a lot," I splutter.

She grins. "Sorry, I didn't mean it like that." She looks at me and smiles almost affectionately. "You look totally sweet."

Yeah, sweet. Or cute, that's what almost everyone says. There's nothing wrong with having adorable freckles if you feel cute. But what I feel is closer to rage. The only thing about me that actually displays how I feel is my hair. Fire-red, untamable curls that fall down my back, and often into my face.

I pull the hairband off, shake out my hair, and hook my arm through Maya's. "So let's go, let's have a little fun." Have fun. I snort.

I stuff my shirt and other things in Maya's locker, and we rush outside, where Kali is already waiting for us. In her black leather jacket and mini skirt, which might as well be a headband, she looks admirably cool and self-confident, as always. The thick, dark red strands in her black hair contribute to her look.

"Hey," I greet her, and lock arms with her, too.

"Where to?" she asks. "To the Beta Kappas? We can always find something there." She grins meaningfully. The football fraternity has never disappointed us yet.

I shake my head. "Today is the after spring break party." I will never understand the need for a party directly after the famous/infamous spring break, when American students flock to beaches. But today it's a good opportunity for me.

Kali's eyes widen. "Nice! I'd forgotten about that. Aren't the vestal virgins organizing the party this year?"

I make a face. "Yeah, unfortunately."

"Why unfortunately? Their parties are a perfect source for us. I could fulfill my quota for a year in one night there." Her eyes gleam, as if she were definitely up for that challenge.

But Maya gives her a warning look. "Don't even think about it, that would be way too obvious."

Kali shrugs her shoulders. "It wouldn't matter anyway. Good old Hades would still want a new victim from me seven days later."

Maya turns to me. "Are you sure about this after spring break party? It's at the other end of campus."

And the campus is large. Ivy Hall stretches out over a long section of the coast near the small town of St. Ives, including its own small island separated from the mainland by a narrow channel and connected to campus by bridges.

Maya's gaze rests on my wrist. Immediately I feel the need to hide the hand behind my back. How silly. As if Maya hasn't seen it often enough already. As if she didn't have exactly the same thing. I lower my eyes to look at the tattoo that winds around my wrist like a filigree bracelet. Most people don't even notice it, but I feel it every hour, every minute, every second, as if it were made of lead.

I concentrate on the place where the delicate, curvy lines separate a little. It always reminds me of the thorny vines that cover the buildings on campus. From them grows an intricate clock face. There on the inside, where the skin is most delicate, exactly where my pulse beats, that's where the clock is ticking down the time. My time. And Jenna's.

Three hours and thirty-five minutes.

It will take at least twenty-five minutes to get there. Then waiting in line for the door check, finding the right one in the crowd, if he's even there right at the beginning, and if we have to wait on him... damn, damn, damn.

"This could get down to the wire." Maya looks at me with desperation in her eyes.

"Yeah, I know, but it has to be there." It has to be him.

She scrutinizes me, then sighs. "At least the others all came through without any problems this week." She quickly types something into her cell phone, and my own immediately vibrates in my pocket. I don't have to check to know that she sent a group text letting the others know how to get to the after spring break party. Then she whisks us across the campus, through an oddly large number of students. Usually there isn't much going on at this time on a Sunday. I focus on following Maya's zigzag course, until I suddenly run right into her.

"Sorry! I didn't see that you had..." I stop talking when I follow Maya's gaze and see why she came to a halt. We have reached the big crossing, where the main paths through campus intersect. Signposts point in every possible direction toward various university buildings. "University City St. Ives" stands on one pointing inland, since there are several buildings that belong to the college in town, too. Another sign directed toward the coast is emblazoned with weathered letters spelling out "Bloody Marsh Battlefield." Students usually steer clear of the old battlefield with its countless swampy creeks. Those who don't know their way around and go there voluntarily only make that mistake once. And no one is crazy enough to hang out there after dark.

Today, however, there are giant crowds of spectators filling all the paths, and an endless stream of people fills the path in front of us. Men, women, and children in historic costumes, laughing, chatting, and covered from head to toe in mud, block our way forward. It's impossible to move ahead.

Maya curses softly, but I can't stop myself from staring at the spectacle with my mouth hanging open. They are carrying weapons, swords, bayonets, and flags. On second glance I notice that they are loosely organized into groups that are wearing different uniforms. A few of them have drums, and there are people on horseback here and there.

Kali giggles. "Every time you forget that you've ended up in the South, these crazy people get together to play war and remind you that you're in Georgia."

Maya rolls her eyes. “That’s not a game. They recreate the historic battles between the British and the Spanish that took place here as accurately as possible to gain new insights.”

“That’s what they say, so people won’t think they’re totally insane for rolling around in the mud and playing with their weapons.” Kali was still grinning.

Maya sighs. “We should get moving and find a way around them.” She throws me a concerned glance that catches my attention. My clock is ticking. We have to get to the party. Now.

“And before those cannons reach us.” Maya gestures toward the path leading to the battlefields. For real. Cannons. Also covered in mud and filth. They are huge, unwieldy, and being maneuvered by a lot of people. When they reach us, they’ll completely block our path. But how are we supposed to get across to the other side before they reach us while the entire mass of soldiers is marching past us?

“Quick, there are a few deserters. They probably want to go to the after spring break party instead of the history picnic.” Kali laughs and literally throws herself into the gap the couple of reenactors have created in the stream of people. Maya and I follow her. We just manage to wriggle our way through the crowd before the opening closes again.

Relieved, Maya urges us onward again. With long strides we rush across the entire campus, past the ornate buildings housing various departments, past the large library, and the many little stores and shops nestled between them. Even at this time of day, they are filled with students surrounded by laptops, thick books, and cups of coffee. We pass enormous buildings where the students live who didn’t choose to join a fraternity or sorority, or weren’t accepted by them. Again and again I look at my wrist, where the hands on the clock unremittently move forward. Only the largest hand, the one that indicates the days, doesn’t move. It’s already at zero.

Out of breath, we finally reach the house of the vestal virgins. It’s built of the same gray stone as the university buildings, has the same ornate decorations around the windows, and has the same steeped-in-tradition look, as if it wants to mask the fact that it is only a miniature version of one of the massive residence halls. A typical fraternity or sorority house, basically, of which there are a multitude here on campus. The music that blares from the house is anything but traditional, nor are the guys gathered in the yard outside the entrance who check us out as we walk past them. They grin at each other and clink their beer bottles. I make a grimace. If there’s one thing I can’t stand, it’s drunk guys. They seem to notice what I’m thinking, because their laughter follows me all the way to the end of the line that’s formed outside the sorority house.

“It’s a long way to the entrance.” Tense, I stare at the big double door. It could be considered more of a portal, actually, because to the left and right of the door stand Greek columns topped by a triangular roof. “Vestal Virgins” is written there in fake ancient Greek script.

Kali snorts. “Hades would laugh his head off if he saw this. And Vesta, too. Vestal virgins.”

“They think it’s cool,” I mutter. “It doesn’t mean anything.”

“Exactly. It doesn’t mean anything. They don’t live like vestal virgins, quite the opposite, actually. They probably don’t even know that vestal virgins are priestesses of the goddess Vesta.” She gestures toward the fake-Greek letters. “For a Roman goddess.” For a moment she sounds almost angry. But then she laughs and tucks her thick, dark red hair behind her ears. “Whatever. As long as the party isn’t one of those awful toga parties where everyone runs around in old sheets pretending to be Caesar.”

“First we have to actually get inside.” I should have known that a ridiculous number of people would show up today. The vestal virgins’ parties are always popular. It isn’t easy to get in, lots of people are turned away, and I had hoped that would scare off most people from trying in the first place. That was a big mistake.

Three hours and ten minutes.

Nervously I scan the long line stretching toward the door for a familiar face, and find several. Relieved, I push my way forward to the group, ignoring the indignant comments of other people waiting.

“Izanagi, Loki, how lucky that you’re already here.” I hug them to signal to other people in line that we belong together. “And pretty far ahead.”

“We were nearby and got in line as soon as we got Maya’s message. She wrote that it’s going to be a close call for you again,” Loki explains.

“Thank you.”

Izanagi brushes his black hair across his forehead. Then he studies me. “You seem quite tense, somehow,” he adds dryly.

I just make a face in response. Without a word, he reaches for my arm. He whistles softly when he sees my clock. “Maybe you shouldn’t wait until the last minute again next time?” His voice is suddenly slightly worried, not the same teasing tone as a moment ago.

I swallow hard. I don’t mean to let it get so tight. But in the same instant I fulfill my quota, the clock on my wrist resets itself and the countdown starts all over again. I always want to use that entire time span so I don’t have to do it any more often than absolutely necessary; so I don’t have to do it to any more people than necessary. Izanagi knows that perfectly well, which is why he doesn’t say anything else while I nervously shift from side to side until we finally reach the bouncers at the door. They are wearing togas.

Kali rolls her eyes. The two well-muscled guys study us one at a time. Kali, with her incredibly dark eyes and a tiny mini skirt revealing her long legs. Maya in her white dress, pursing her lips. Wiry Loki, whose name is actually Daniel, but looks like a smaller, blonde version of Tom Hiddleston and has always hated his name anyway. Finally, they turn their attention to Izanagi, with his unruly, slightly too long black hair. He’s wearing a denim jacket casually over a white t-shirt. One of the two bouncers, a good looking guy with a clean-shaven head, studies Izanagi with a rather brazen look. He literally runs his eyes up and down his tall, well-built body from head to toe, as if Izanagi were nothing but a hunk of meat. Disgusting. But Izanagi stays cool and just winks at him. Maybe he already has this one on his list for the next kiss.

“You guys can go in,” says the brazen one.

The others go through without looking back at me. I want to follow them, but the second bouncer, a brown-haired Hercules look-alike, stands in my way. I start to panic, and steal a glance at my clock face. Oh, come on! “Excuse me, I’m with them.”

He studies me. “You don’t look like you’re old enough. Are you even a student here, or did you run away from the high school?” He grins at his buddy. “Sorry, but we can’t let high school students in.”

I curse inwardly. Yet another disadvantage of being cute. Kali is younger than me, but she never gets stopped because she easily looks like she’s over eighteen. I, on the other hand, look more like sixteen. Because that’s how old I was when I made the pact. I start to say something when the bouncer whispers to me. “At least not without protection. Who knows what might happen to you.” He smiles at me meaningfully.

Don’t lose your cool, Erin. Stay calm. Stupidly, I can feel the rage building in me anyway. At that moment I spot Maya, who sends me a warning look from inside.

*Just put him on your list. But you don’t have time for this right now,* her gaze seems to be saying.

Unless I just make a last-minute change of plans. But no, I chose my victim this week very deliberately. Number 132 has to be disposed of, immediately. This one can wait.

I take a deep breath and then smile ever so sweetly. “If I knew your name, I could tell everyone that I’m under your protection.” I smile especially flirtatiously. “Surely no one would dare question that.”

He grins, bends down to me and whispers his name in my ear, which I immediately set on my mental list. Then he lets me by. Obviously and rather predictably, it’s enough for him that I massaged his ego a little bit. Annoyed, I brush past him, prepared to deck him after all if he even thinks about slapping my butt. Astonishingly, he lets me through without incident. Inside the sorority house, I don’t even pause to look around for the others. I have less than three hours; even under normal circumstances that’s very little time.

“Hey, there you are! Did you stop to flirt with the bouncer?” Izanagi asks.

“He would have liked that. Or not, actually, at least after the kiss.”

He grins, and we step into the large marble hall. A stairway on the side leads to the upper story, where the students’ rooms are. My attention is briefly caught by a painting of a blonde girl. Two girls are standing in front of it, and one of them is practically worshipping it. She must be a new one, learning all about Lyra, the girl in the picture and leader of the vestal virgins.

Izanagi sighs. “This cult around them is slowly getting ridiculous.”

One of the girls apparently shares his opinion, because she subtly rolls her eyes while the other one continues to talk to her.

Kali and Loki join us, and Kali holds out a small glass toward me as she simultaneously checks out the female party guests, looking for a victim for her next round. The glass smokes slightly. I raise an eyebrow.

“A little something to get in the mood.” She raises her glass and swallows the contents.

“I don’t drink on the job,” I respond as casually as possible.

“I don’t understand. You?” She looks at Loki.

He grins and tilts back his own smoking shot in reply.

“Here.” I try to hand my glass back to Kali, but she lifts a hand in refusal.

“Keep it and use it for disinfection or something.” She sticks her tongue out at me.

I have to laugh. “That’d be more for afterwards, then.” I give my glass to Izanagi, who has been eyeing it.

“Are you sure?” he asks.

I nod. I should probably just come out and finally tell them that I can’t stand alcohol. But then they might ask why, and I have no desire to talk about that. “Working under the influence is dangerous,” is all I say. It’s not a lie. I really do find it better to have all my faculties intact while doing the work of the goddess of vengeance. “It just leads to...”

“Having a damn good time?” Izanagi interrupts me, with a wink in my direction.

Kali smiles knowingly. “Exactly. And afterwards you can wipe the slate clean, so to speak, by giving your one night stand a kiss. That’s a win-win. No one knows anything about it, and our secret stays that way.”

“Well I don’t like the idea of having to use the kiss on a guy I just slept with.” I don’t say that at the moment, it’s all I can cope with just having to kiss someone.

“True enough. That can end badly. But it’s even worse when the kiss happens accidentally right in the middle of the action.” Maya, who has joined the group meanwhile, rolls her eyes as if she’s speaking from experience.

Kali giggles. “Yeah, that can really ruin your night, even if it’s good for the quota.”

Shit, the quota. “Okay, you do what you want, I have to get moving here.”

“Do that, we’re going to dance a while.” Maya drags the others to the middle of the entrance hall, which is being used as a dance floor.

I look around the sorority house. I wrinkle my face in disgust. It’s as if every guy at this party has to put their despicable character on display. How can anyone come here willingly? The house itself is actually kind of nice, modern but still a little shady. There’s a comfortable common room that’s being used as a hangout lounge, a dance floor where people can dance pressed up against each other in a crowd, but could be a place for group celebrations. It’s a house where you could enjoy spending time and hanging out. But I definitely don’t have time for that right now.

Two hours and forty-five minutes.

I crane my neck. Where is number 132 hiding? He has to be here. I researched and planned everything so thoroughly.

“Why do you always wait until the eleventh hour?” Maya calls out as she dances past me. She just can’t let it go. Later she’ll probably give me another lecture, even though she knows why this happens to me again and again. For some stupid reason, I can’t hold it against her. She is right, but this party is the only place where I can run into him without attracting attention.

“Just take someone else. There are enough to choose from here.” Maya dances past me again.

A hard push makes me lose my balance. Instinctively I whirl around to see what happened. A girl with two glasses in her hands and a flower wreath in her hair calls out “Sorry!” and then disappears into the mass of people. I start to reply to her, but my eyes lock

on a guy standing near the hangout lounge. A bright spotlight shines on him from behind so that I can't see the color of his hair. It looks as if it consists of light.

Don't be ridiculous. He's just blonde.

"Looks like he's got a halo!" Maya screams in my ear to be heard over the music, which is getting louder and louder.

I snort. None of the guys here would recognize a halo if it hit them in the head. Nonetheless, I involuntarily take a few steps in his direction until I can see his face. He is good looking, a little angular, but I like that, especially the slightly oversized nose.

"Yeah, take that one, he looks like an easy catch," Maya urges as she passes me yet again. "You only have..." She grabs my arm and lifts it to look at my tattoo.

I take my hand away from her. "Two hours and thirty-five minutes. I know!" I hiss. "That's why I have to find number 132, the one I've already had my eye on the entire week, and I have to do it now, before the time runs out." And before he actually kills his girlfriend the next time around. "That one over there doesn't interest me."

What a grandiose lie. I can hardly tear myself away from the sight of him. Admittedly, it's a pretty hot view, as far as I can tell here in the semidarkness with the backlighting. Definitely athletic, but not too muscular, wiry, but with broad shoulders.

But that's not the reason I'm drawn to him. There's something about him that makes him stand out from the others, as if he didn't belong here at all. Something that makes my heart pound.

At that moment, he looks over toward me, and our eyes meet.

## Chapter Two

### Arden

The bass thrums, and the crowd on the dance floor sways back and forth in time to it. The music has a good beat. You can have a good time here, even if coming to this sorority party wouldn't necessarily have been my first choice. Not at this house.

"Hey, don't make such a sour face, Arden." Carson clicks his beer bottle against my soda. "Only drinking Coke was your idea. I would have generously allowed you a beer today."

His conciliatory tone makes me smile. "Thank you, oh captain, my captain. Your generosity knows no bounds."

"Right?" He pats himself on the back. "Am I the best team captain you've ever had, or what?"

In fact, he really is. In the three months that I've been here at Ivy Hall, I've learned to appreciate him as leader of the fencing team. Even if his motivational methods are kind of strange. Or maybe because of that. But of course I don't pass up the opportunity to play with him a little. I tilt my head doubtfully. "The team captain at my old university wasn't bad either. His weapon of choice was also the saber, just like you and me." Choosing to specialize in saber makes a statement by which we recognize each other.

Immediately there's a competitive gleam in Carson's eyes that would be more fitting in the gym than at a party. "What's his name? So I can be informed when I compete against him the next time. I'm always on the lookout for worthy opponents."

I open my mouth, then close it again. What was that guy's name again? "Sorry, I can't think of it right now."

Carson stares at me for a second, then laughs in disbelief, but it quickly turns into a knowing grin. "I get it. We all partied too hard during the break. That can affect your memory. I, on the other hand, make sure that my team won't forget me so fast, even during spring break." He hands me his cell phone. On it there's a photo of him, Sergei, and a few others on a beach. In typical spring break style, they're wearing screamingly colorful swimsuits and have black reflective stripes painted under their eyes.

"Looks familiar," I say. And that's the truth. But the fact that I mostly stick to soda has nothing to do with that. I don't like the way the world gets distorted when you've had too much alcohol. I'd rather have all my faculties intact.

Carson's eyes widen. "Sorry, man, I totally forgot that you had to work this time." He smiles good naturedly. "But no problem. Next year you'll come with us. At least as long as you earn your spot at the team tournament. You could do it, I mean you were the second best today." He himself, of course, came out number one.

I smile weakly. "Today was just a warm up. At the tournament I'll kick your butt."

Carson grins happily and pounds me on the shoulder. "Challenge accepted. I knew you'd fit right in with the team." For him, competition within his own group is more important than competing against other teams. That's his strategy as team captain to motivate us to peak performance. No idea if that's why, but the Ivy Hall fencing team is one of the best in the United States.

"Hey, wanna get some action together?" He gestures toward two girls who look vaguely familiar to me. Probably from some class or another. Carson sighs exaggeratedly. "The Johnson twins. So hot."

They look over at us, and one of them holds my gaze. Her smile is not only extremely seductive, but also appealing. Nonetheless, I shake my head without even thinking about it.

Carson rolls his eyes. "Suit yourself. Leaves more for me. Wish me luck. They have the reputation of being pretty hard to conquer. Let's see if I can convince them all by myself." He pushes his way through the dancing crowd.

Sergei and Armando sway in my direction, arm in arm. Just before they can make their way through the masses to reach me, a girl with two overfilled glasses in her hands and wearing a crown of flowers in her hair shoves her way past me. She screams an apology in my face but keeps moving before I can answer her, and rams into another girl a few meters away, who whirls around in surprise.

And looks over at me.

She probably wanted to say something to the girl, too, because her mouth is open, but she doesn't say anything. Instead she stares at me as if she's seen a ghost.

Or my hair.

Her hair isn't exactly inconspicuous either. Wild red curls that surround her like liquid fire, from which her eyes blaze forth like ice crystals. Or maybe it's just the strobe lights. Probably that.

Automatically I take a step in her direction. Are you crazy? What the hell are you doing? And I stop in my tracks. It's not an option to talk to her.

She doesn't seem to have that hesitation because she is coming toward me now. She's still staring at me as if I were from another planet. Then she glances at my hands.

"You're drinking soda?"

I blink at her. "Uh, yeah?" Good answer, Arden. Keep it up and she'll be convinced in no time that talking to you isn't an option.

"Okay," she says.

"Okay," I reply.

It's official. This conversation will go down in history as the weirdest first exchange between two students at a party ever. Nonetheless, or maybe because of that, it's the most promising conversation I've had since I arrived at Ivy Hall.

I smile at her and hold out the bottle in her direction. "Want some?"

She looks at me as puzzled as if I had offered her not a Coke, but my firstborn child. At least. Or as if she thought I were offering her a Coke I'd already started drinking. "I haven't taken a sip yet," I add.

"Uh, no. Thanks. No. I... have to go."

"Of course." I grin spontaneously. "I would say that, too, after this conversation."

She stares at me, but then she smiles, fleetingly. Still, I can't tear my eyes away.

"It wasn't that bad," she says.

Now I'm the one who has to laugh. She smiles that smile again that totally captivates me. For a moment I have the impression that she wants to say something else, but then she turns away and leaves.

I watch her as she winds her way through the crowd, and I have a sneaking feeling that I won't forget her as quickly as I should.

"Respect."

I spin around. Carson stands next to me and stares at the girl. "I think you're the only guy who could manage to hit on girls at a party by drinking soda." His voice carries a smile.

"That makes me really proud to be your captain."

I make a face. "I don't want to disappoint you, but I believe that was a rejection at the end." Wasn't it?

One more time I look after the girl. Somehow I hope that she'll reconsider and come back, so we can continue this strangely entertaining conversation and I can have another chance to get her to smile. But she has long since disappeared among the other parties.