

IMMORTAL GAME

ALLISON
SAFT



WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK



*You must take your opponent into a deep,
dark forest where $2 + 2 = 5$, and the path
leading out is only wide enough for one.*

– MIKHAIL TAL,
EIGHTH WORLD CHESS CHAMPION





The night that changed the course of the Fury sisters' lives began as all the others before it had. Shea sat motionless in the bay window that overlooked the front yard, scowling down at her chessboard. The pieces were cheap, shiny plastic, with green felt bottoms that reminded her of a pool table. At eleven years old, Shea didn't care what they looked like. She loved them all the same.

She loved how each of them crackled with their own silent power. She loved the beautiful, harmonious sense they made. Here within these sixty-four squares lay an entire world like an ocean, infinite and ever shifting. One where Shea never encountered a problem she could not solve or tumult she could not quell. There existed only tension and the release of tension, latent possibilities, and—

"Shea." Her older sister's voice sliced clean through her focus. Aileen sounded annoyed, which suggested that she'd been standing in the doorway for quite some time. How long *had* Aileen been standing there? Couldn't she see that Shea was in the middle of something? "Hello? Earth to Shea."

“What?” Shea snapped. She couldn’t contain her irritation, although she hadn’t tried very hard.

“So you *are* alive,” Aideen replied pleasantly. “Step away from the board and have some fun for once. We’re going to catch crayfish.”

Shea reluctantly peeled her gaze away from the chessboard in front of her, where all the pieces had been laid out in a pretty, complicated gridlock. Her eyes ached, but her body buzzed with the thrill of an imminent breakthrough, her mind with the pleasant exhaustion of deep thought. Splashing around in some dirty water couldn’t possibly be more fun than this. Not that Aideen would understand.

But with her sister twinkling at her like that, what else could Shea do but follow her? It’d been ages since Aideen wanted to leave the house, much less go on any sort of adventure. Shea sighed resignedly. To make sure she wouldn’t forget her idea, she recorded her most recent move in her notebook—the dark blue one, with a rocket ship on the front cover—and set down her pen.

“Fine. I’ll go.”

Aideen beamed. “You won’t regret it.”

They got their bikes from the shed and walked them down the driveway. Shea, Aideen, and their mother lived at the very top of the neighborhood’s tallest hill. Aideen coasted down the slope: no brakes, rising out of her seat, her hair lit by the fading June sun. Watching her felt like analyzing a chess game, with a thousand different dangers and possibilities unfolding. *Be careful*, Shea wanted to say. But she bit her tongue. What did it matter if the worst of her fears came to pass? Even if Aideen fell and broke an arm, she’d heal overnight.

Their crayfishing spot was a creek hidden deep in the

Gallaghers' property, past the rickety, half-rotted treehouse and through a dense thicket of maples. By the time they reached it, the terrain had grown treacherous. The earth was damp and uneven from where the crayfish had built their little chimneys of mud. Shea did her best not to trample them as she trudged toward the water.

Aideen propped her bike up on its kickstand. "Think we'll catch a lot of them?"

Shea shrugged. "I'm going to catch more than you."

Aideen flashed her a grin. "We'll see about that. Either way, I bet we'll have enough for dinner for a whole week."

Shea, for her part, was skeptical. This was not clean water, and if they ate them, they'd probably die. But if she said the wrong thing, she'd ruin this. Aideen would withdraw inside herself again, alone in that dark place where Shea couldn't reach her. The right words didn't come to Shea like the right chess moves did. So, she kept her mouth shut.

Aideen toed off her shoes and rolled up the cuffs of her jeans. She was sixteen, and right now, she looked it: carefree and wild, her eyes and cheeks aglow with exertion. She splashed into the water with a little shriek, and the current eddied around her ankles. "Come on. There's no sharks in here. And probably no dryads."

Of course there were no dryads. Unless you counted Aideen—which Shea didn't—fae hadn't freely crossed to this side of the Veil in more than one hundred years. Shea refrained from comment as she yanked off her shoes and waded into the water. The cold, at least, was a welcome shock against her sweat-damp skin.

"Do you remember how to catch them?" Aideen asked.

“Yes,” Shea replied, only a little sourly.

When Shea lifted one of the stones from the bottom of the creek, a crayfish scuttled out in a cloud of silt. Shea snatched it by its tail, but before she could triumphantly pull it from the water, it pinched her. On reflex, she dropped it and hissed in pain.

Aideen laughed, delighted and full-throated. Shea tried to glare at her, but her sister’s amusement was contagious. She had to bite down on her lip to keep from smiling as Aideen scooped the crayfish into her palms. It seemed perfectly happy and docile there, its carapace gleaming with streaks of blue and rust. It brandished its tiny claws at Shea like a boxer in the ring, but it did not make any attempt to escape.

“How did you do that?”

“Magic, obviously.”

It occurred to Shea just then that it had grown darker—and eerily silent. Mist slid through the trees like the slow roll of the tide. It leached all of summer’s heat from the air. Ice crept delicately across the surface of the water, and frost bloomed on the grass. Shea shuddered at the sudden cold. How was it possible? In the space between one breath and another, winter had descended on them.

“What’s happening?”

“I don’t know,” Aideen said. “I haven’t done anything.”

Aideen stared fixedly at something behind Shea. The crayfish slipped from Aideen’s hands, and her face went as white as bone. Shea dared to look over her shoulder, her heart beating wildly in her throat.

A man and a horse stood on the opposite bank.

A diadem of silver branches rested on his brow, and his flaxen hair fell across his face, obscuring his left eye. In one

hand, he held his horse's reins; in the other, a five-pointed spear. His cloak was fastened at his throat with a brooch of pure gold, a sliver of his brocade doublet visible just beneath. Delicate golden blossoms unfurled from the trees around him. He stared at Aideen in the same way most boys in town did, which made protectiveness surge up within Shea. Only, this was no boy. There was no mistaking his regal bearing, or the way the very air seemed to bend around him.

This was a faerie lord.

"It is true what they say," he said. "Lovely anyone, until Aideen. Beautiful anyone, until Aideen."

Shea opened her mouth to speak, but Aideen shoved Shea behind her. "Who are you?"

"I am your husband." Fae couldn't lie. If nothing else, he believed it to be true.

There was no protocol for this. By mutual agreement of the mortal and faerie realms, crossing the Veil was highly regulated. Even so, Aideen would know better than to offend him by denying it outright. At last, she said, "Aideen is my name, but I think you've mistaken me for someone else. We've never met before."

"There is no mistaking you, Aideen Echraide, daughter of Ailill," the faerie lord replied, with a reverence that made Shea's skin crawl. "It was long ago, in another life, when last we saw one another. Your bride price, your weight in gold and in silver, was paid. For you, all the rivers in Ireland were carved, all its plains raised. But you were unjustly taken from me."

Aideen laughed breathlessly, as if in utter disbelief. Shea could see now that her hands were trembling. "Tell me. What is your name?"

"No hard matter. Midir of Bri Leith."

Midir of Bri Leith. Even Shea knew that name. He was the High King of the Irish Otherworld—but more importantly, one of the best chess players in history.

Shea couldn't square what he was saying with her reality. Aideen couldn't be the Queen of the Otherworld. Even if she wasn't exactly *normal*, she wasn't fae, either. She could lie. She could touch iron. She had rounded ears, the same as any other mortal. But doubt crept in.

Their mother always insisted that Aideen had been miraculously conceived. Nobody had believed her at first, because there wasn't any mystery in a girl like Kara Fury getting pregnant at sixteen. At least that's what Shea heard the ladies at church say. But once Aideen was born, nobody called Kara a liar anymore. Just looking at Aideen, you could tell she was fae-touched. A faint radiance emanated from her skin, like the blushing light of the moon. Her eyes, a hyacinth blue, were as depthless as the sea. When she spoke with a certain tone, you couldn't help doing exactly what she commanded. And sometimes, when men looked at her, they went a little mad.

"Tell me," Aideen said dreamily, as though the words were not her own, "what was it that parted us?"

"No hard matter. The sorcery of Fuamnach and the spells of Bressel Etarlam." He extended a gauntleted hand to her, the jewels embedded in each knuckle glinting in the dying sunlight. "Will you come away with me to a land where old age, sickness, decay, and falsehood are unknown?"

Aideen was staring at Midir with a glassy, wondering look—as though he held the answer to every question she'd ever had. But something was wrong. If Aideen could put people under a spell, then Midir could, too.

Shea couldn't let him manipulate her. She imagined how it felt to sit in front of a chessboard. That power, that certainty, coated her all over like armor. "The answer is no. Leave her alone."

Midir's one visible eye bored into Shea. Clearly, he'd just registered her existence and was irritated by it. Beneath that stare, she was little more than an insect—something hardly worth killing, let alone noticing. Shea glared back at him, furious and defiant and utterly petrified.

"*Shea.*" Aideen seized hold of Shea's hand. Her wild, panicked expression said, *Are you crazy?* Maybe she was. Shea couldn't bring herself to regret it. She'd broken the spell.

"Such a small body to harbor a warrior's spirit," Midir remarked mildly. "Does this child speak for you, Be Find?"

"I speak for myself," Aideen replied, her voice trembling, but firm. "I'm sorry, but I can't go with you. I don't know who you are."

"I see." With a flourish of his gold-trimmed cloak, he bowed to Aideen. "What is a short while longer, when I have already waited a thousand lifetimes? I shall come to woo you again."

Just like that, he was gone, vanished in a swirl of delicate apple blossoms.

Aideen grabbed Shea by both shoulders and gave her a little shake. "Don't ever do something that reckless again! Do you have any idea what could have happened if—"

"Sorry." She tried her best to sound contrite. "I won't."

The entire walk home, her mind turned and turned. Midir had said he would come back. And when he did, Shea would be ready for him.

CHAPTER ONE



EIGHT YEARS LATER

Maybe Shea should've suspected that something was amiss sooner. In retrospect, there were some obvious signs. Like the moment she'd pulled onto the bike path and the clear, mid-autumn morning had turned suddenly and inexplicably gray. Or when the fog thickened around her, so dense that she could see little but the shape of dark, skeletal trees leering out of the gloom. Now, she was certain something had gone wrong. Although she hadn't taken a single turn, she'd passed this tree—one with a broken branch—at least twice before.

Shea slowed her bike to a stop and turned the collar of her bomber jacket up against the rain. It fell steadily now, staining the asphalt a glossy black, and plastered her hair to the nape of her neck and forehead. She scraped it out of her face and slicked it back as best she could.

It was too quiet.

Somewhere along the way, the burbling of the creek and the trilling of birdsong had been swallowed by an oppressive, un-

natural silence. In the stillness, she heard only her own labored breathing and water dripping onto the pavement—and in the distance, the faintest strains of mournful music, carried like petals on the breeze.

Shea swore under her breath. The Veil between worlds wasn't as solid as she would've liked. There were places its seams had worn thin over time, like an abandoned house or the occasional corridor in an old, unloved hotel. Others, like the shade beneath a lone rowan tree or a ring of bone-white mushrooms, were natural portals to the Otherworld. And then, of course, there were occasions when the veil was ripped open from the other side. Those were a rarity these days, considering the Agreement of Tara strictly regulated the crossing between realms, but here she was. Clearly, whoever—or whatever—was following her had found some sort of loophole. That, or it didn't care about the consequences.

Just perfect, Shea thought. At this rate, she'd be late to her tournament.

She curled her fingers around the handlebars in a white-knuckled grip. "Let's get this over with. I know you're there. What do you want?"

There came the sound of laughter, as delicate and sinister as winter's first breath. A chill skittered down Shea's spine.

"Come away with me," a melodic voice said from above, "to a land where old age, sickness, decay, and falsehood are unknown."

Shea knew that voice. In an instant, irritation doused all her fear. When she looked up, she spotted a girl perched on a high branch of a stately oak, with one leg crossed lazily over the other. It was Ciara of Bri Leith: a fellow chess grandmaster, a princess of the Irish Otherworld, and Midir's younger sister.

“Ah, I’ve always wanted to deliver that line.” Ciara preened. “Did it work? Have I ensorcelled you?”

“You.” Shea glowered. “What are you doing here?”

“I’ll take that as a no,” Ciara said, clearly a little put out. “Is that really all you have to say to me? It’s been a long time.”

“Not long enough,” she muttered. It had been exactly six months since Ciara had last appeared in the mortal realm.

“Come again? I cannot hear you from so high.”

“I didn’t say—” Shea cut herself off. “Forget it. Just come down.”

Ciara stood, then stepped off the branch. She floated in the air for one breathless moment before drifting toward the ground like a leaf borne on a gentle current. Her cloak billowed weightlessly upward, revealing the insides of its split sleeves; they were embroidered in spectacular colors in the pattern of a butterfly’s wings. Ciara landed in front of Shea without a sound. Ciara towered over her, an effect made more pronounced by the heels of her alarmingly pointed boots.

Ciara rested a hand on her hip. “Is that better?”

“Sure. But you didn’t answer my question.” What *was* she doing here? A select few faerie grandmasters received special dispensation to cross the Veil—but only to participate in official tournaments. “You’re not competing today. Are you even allowed to be here?”

“Of course I am. I’m here on official business. At least, my brother’s courier was. I’ve relieved him of his duties for today.”

“Courier,” Shea repeated incredulously. “Don’t you have better things to do than run errands?”

When Ciara waved her hand, the gold bangles around her

wrist clanked merrily together. “Almost certainly. But I couldn’t resist being the one to break the good news to you.”

“And what news is that?” Shea checked her phone impatiently, only to see that the clock had frozen.

“You’ve been invited to Midir’s tournament.”

The air escaped Shea’s lungs in a rush. Her ears rang painfully. “What?”

“You’ve been invited to Midir’s tournament,” Ciara repeated.

Shea nearly collapsed beneath the weight of those words—from the sudden torrent of relief and terror and vindication. It had been six years since Midir had taken Aideen from her. Ever since then, qualifying for his tournament had been her sole purpose in life. Once every hundred years in the mortal realm, Midir invited a selection of elite chess players—both faerie and mortal—to the Otherworld, where they would compete for the honor of playing one game against him. Whoever defeated him would be granted one wish that was within his power to fulfill.

It was a tradition that he’d maintained for hundreds of years—even now, when most other faerie kingdoms had cut contact with the mortal realm. But the Irish fae adored chess almost as much as they did poetry. And to the fae, there was nothing more poetically tragic than someone having their heart’s desire within reach—only to watch it slip through their fingers. Nobody had ever defeated Midir, after all. Shea knew that better than anyone.

“That *is* good news,” Shea said hoarsely.

“Shall I ask again, then? Will you come away to Tír nAill?”

Ciara withdrew an apple from her cloak. It was pure gold

and shone like a lantern against the gloom. Shea had dropped out of school to pursue chess professionally, but she'd read enough faerie ballads in her English classes to know this portended ill. That apple was a poisoned pawn: too dangerous to take, too tempting not to. Shea took a cautious step forward. Ciara smelled of hyacinth and honey, rain and the loam of shadowed woods. Here in autumn, it was as though she'd stepped right out of spring.

Shea had never understood those poems about hapless mortals addled by faerie fruit and the beauty of faerie women. But when she lifted her gaze to Ciara's, she felt as Keats or Hogg might have when they first glimpsed the wonder and terror of the Otherworld. The radiance of the apple illuminated Ciara's face from below. Her skin was dusted with freckles and gold powder. Her eyes glittered, as wild and dark as night. Her hair was a brilliant copper, blazing bright against the green damask of her cloak.

Shea's heart gave a hard thud. She was in danger, she knew. Somehow, she didn't care. "Yes."

"Very well, then." With a twirl of her wrist, a branch of pure silver appeared in Ciara's other hand. "These are your tickets to Tír nAill. Now listen carefully. On the eve of Samhain, bite into the apple. And when the Féth Fíada descends upon you, you must cut through it with the silver bough. Only then will you know where to go."

Shea only understood about half of that explanation, but the particulars of faerie magic didn't interest her much. As she reached toward the apple, Ciara snatched her hand away. Just like that, the spell shattered. Gone was the dreamy haze. Gone was the heady temptation of magic. Standing before her was

not a beguiling faerie princess but the insufferable brat she had the misfortune of calling her colleague.

“Give it to me,” Shea snapped.

Ciara inspected her own reflection in its glossy surface. “For your insolence, no.”

Shea ground her teeth together. “I’m serious.”

“Oh, likewise. I am gravely serious. I think I’d like you to bargain for it.”

“And why would I do that?”

Ciara’s eyes glittered maliciously. “Because I have something you want.”

At that moment, Shea hated herself as much as she did Ciara. She’d been too careless, too impatient. Somehow, she’d forgotten fae were like this. They scented desperation like blood in the water. If Ciara hadn’t known before, it was obvious now: Shea would do *anything* to make it to the Otherworld.

“If it’s an invitation,” Shea countered, “then it’s already mine.”

Ciara’s cheek dimpled. “It could always get lost. Make this easy for me, Shea. I do hate conflict.”

“Fine,” Shea gritted out. “What do you want?”

Ciara tossed the apple in the air and caught it. “All I want is for you to take me somewhere. I have heard there is a place that never slumbers, where you can acquire all manner of potions. I believe it is named after a mathematical construction. Seven minus eleven, was it?”

“You mean the convenience store?” Shea could do nothing but stare at her. Why would a faerie princess want to . . . ? No, she couldn’t entertain this nonsense. “Name another price. I have a game to get to.”

“Pity. There’s nothing else I want. Of course, if you agree to my terms, I can always collect later, at any time of my choosing.”

Leaving any faerie bargain open-ended was an objectively terrible idea. But with the game clock ticking, she couldn’t bring herself to begrudge Ciara something so small. “Deal. Now hand it over.”

Ciara’s night-dark eyes shone. “Deal.”

Magic shimmered in the air and tightened like a noose around Shea’s throat. At least Ciara held out the apple to her. When Shea took it, Ciara seized hold of her wrist. Her rings bit into Shea’s skin with cold.

“Before I forget,” said Ciara, “I wanted to give you some parting advice.”

Shea wrenched her arm away. “Oh, yeah?”

“I would advise you to decline this invitation.”

Shea barked out a laugh. “Yeah. That’s not going to happen.”

Ciara made a soft, frustrated sound. “I know you do not trust me, which is probably wise. But trust me in this. Tír nAill is no place for you.”

Shea scoffed. As if Ciara cared a whit for her safety. Nothing the fae did was selfless, and Ciara’s real motives were painfully obvious: She wanted to win the tournament herself. No doubt she’d been invited, too. As much as Shea hated to admit it, Ciara was one of the very best players in the world—and apparently, the best thing to happen to chess in decades.

For the better part of a century, the Otherworld had sent a contingent to compete in mortal tournaments. Those faerie grandmasters were emissaries from a hostile, alien world: silent and unknowable and terrifying, with no interest in mortals. And then one day, a teenage faerie princess arrived on the scene.

She was mercurial, dramatic, vain, and talented: the enfant terrible of chess. Fans couldn't get enough of her.

When she was twelve, she glamourised her opponent so that he fell asleep at the board before he could deliver a very pretty checkmate. At thirteen, she'd hurled a rook at a player at a neighboring board for coughing too loudly. At sixteen, she destroyed multiple hotel rooms (several in fits of rage when she lost, most of them during revelries after she trounced her opponents). At seventeen, she cursed an Estonian grandmaster to laugh uncontrollably any time he attempted to play his favorite opening—because during an interview, he'd implied that she wasn't as talented as Midir.

Of course, no one ever punished her for any of it. What mortal tournament director would dare sanction a faerie royal? Who would bar the most popular player in the world from competing? Shea wouldn't fold so easily. This was nothing but another stunt in Ciara's long line of stunts, all of them designed to annoy and intimidate and get her own way.

Shea smiled mirthlessly. "I get it. You're scared you're going to lose to me."

Ciara reeled back. "Don't be ridiculous. I am not afraid of you."

"What are you even playing for?" Shea asked. "You're a princess. I'm sure your brother would give you whatever you asked for."

"I suppose you believe we faerie grandmasters live such charmed lives."

"That's right." Shea met her eyes, hoping that every ounce of her disdain shone through. "Thanks for the generous warning, but I'm going. And if we play, I'll destroy you."

The air crackled with tension, and Shea's blood quickened in anticipation. In anticipation of what, she couldn't be certain. Something within her, long dormant, stirred reluctantly to life. She and Ciara had played many times over the years, each one more ridiculous than the last. But they'd played exactly one *serious* game. Shea still remembered every move. What she remembered even more clearly was the way she felt sitting across the board from Ciara. Like all her old wounds were aching. Like winning was as urgent and necessary as breathing. She felt the same now.

Until she could face Midir again, she would settle for annihilating his sister.

"Well, then." Ciara injected false cheer into her voice. "Never let it be said that I did not try to be charitable to you."

When Shea blinked, Ciara was gone—and so was the rain.

Shea stood in the middle of the bike path, drenched in sunshine and dripping from the ends of her hair. The only indication any of it had been real was the fact that she was still clutching the golden apple and the silver branch. She pulled her phone from her pocket to check the time. Her game had begun five minutes ago. Somehow, panic felt very far away.

Shea pressed the home button and stared at her own reflection in the darkened screen. Her blond hair was limp and darkened to the color of dishwater. But her eyes were green and bright and clear, alive and hungry in a way they rarely were anymore. Everything she'd worked for was here in her hands. Finally, she could keep the promise she had made to her sister all those years ago. Finally, she'd get a chance to punish Midir of Bri Leith for what he'd done.

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First published in the United States by Wednesday Books,
an imprint of St. Martin's Publishing Group

EU Representative: Macmillan Publishers Ireland Ltd, 1st Floor, The Liffey
Trust Centre, 117–126 Sheriff Street Upper, Dublin 1, D01 YC43

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address St. Martin's Publishing Group, 120 Broadway, New York,
NY 10271.

www.wednesdaybooks.com

Designed by Devan Norman
Endpaper pattern © Designzonebd/Shutterstock
Case stamp chess piece art © ZOO.BY/Shutterstock

The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
is available upon request.

ISBN 978-1-250-40476-3 (hardcover)
ISBN 978-1-250-40477-0 (ebook)

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First Edition: 2026

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1