

A man in a tattered, blood-stained white tunic is shown from the chest up, holding a sword. The tunic has a large red stain on the right chest and a smaller one on the left shoulder. The sword has a dark hilt and a blade that is glowing with a bright blue and white light, suggesting it is magical or enchanted. The background is dark and filled with sparks and light trails, creating a sense of a battle or a magical event.

THE SWORD
— and —
THE SONG
a novel

C. E. LAUREANO

THE SONG  OF SEARE

Praise for the Song of Seare Series

Oath of the Brotherhood introduces readers to a medieval world in which the natural and supernatural collide in sometimes frightening and often beautiful moments of Christian allegory and emotional truth. Author C.E. Laureano does not hesitate to strike her characters in the heart, contrasting the dissonance of passionate despair against the brighter chords of hope as they are forced to exchange betrayal for aid, death for life, friendship for sacrifice, honor for faithfulness, and all for love.

USA TODAY

The second installment of the Song of Seare series is just as good as the first. Conor and Aine's struggles to hold on to hope makes them lovable characters who resonate with readers. The setting is unique and the plot moves quickly and is very engaging. Readers will be thirsty for the final book in the trilogy. This series is a must-read!

ROMANTIC TIMES

This is Christian fiction presented as high fantasy in an old Ireland-inspired setting. Fantasy readers will be happy with the magic, fighting, and the quest the hero undertakes. Christian fiction readers will be content with the religious message. . . . Inspirational fiction presented in an accessible way.

SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL

The balance of clear storylines and a detailed fantasy world makes this book accessible to people who want to start dipping their foot into the waters of fantasy, and trust me, the water will be warm and welcoming. Laureano has created the beginning of a unique series that will satisfy many readers, and she will definitely leave her own special mark on the genre with the Song of Seare and in future works to come.

TEEN READS

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The Sword and the Song

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CHAPTER ONE

The sword came close enough for him to feel the breath of wind in its passing. Conor jumped back, meeting the edge of the blade too late with his own, and groaned as the impact shuddered into his arms and shoulders.

“You’ve gotten slow.” Eoghan backed off a fraction, just enough that Conor would know he was letting him rest. “This is what happens when you get lazy.”

“I wasn’t lazy,” Conor said through gritted teeth. “I was in captivity.” He used the momentary distraction to launch his attack, harrying his friend with a flurry of strikes. Eoghan brushed them aside in the same way one would swat at a gnat.

Eoghan was right: Conor was slow. And lazy.

The idea burned like fire in his gut. Three months. He had left Ard Dhaimhin for the war in the kingdoms three months ago at the pinnacle of his skills, besting both his friend and Master Liam, former Ceannaire of the Fíréin brotherhood, before he left. And now he could barely keep up in a simple practice match, his arms and shoulders shaking with the exertion of holding the lightweight wooden sword.

Never mind that what he'd said to Eoghan was true. He'd been captured by the Sofarende and fed survival rations for a month, then been entrapped in a sidhe's glamour at the keep of a Gwynn prince for another. The last of his bruises had just faded, and he'd barely returned to his sword work. His victory over the prince's guard captain in Gwydden hinted that perhaps it wasn't his skills that were subpar, but it still rankled to have fallen so far behind his friend, his mentor—his king.

He sprang forward on a surge of energy and irritation, directing one flawless strike after another. Eoghan blocked each of them, but he couldn't counter under the speed. Then Conor closed too much of the gap between them, and Eoghan's sword connected with his right wrist. Involuntarily, Conor's hand opened and the sword fell to the soft sand.

"Yield?" Eoghan asked.

Conor's answer was a shoulder into Eoghan's midsection as he drove him to the ground. Eoghan let out a surprised laugh along with the air in his body as they hit the sand. They grappled for a minute before Conor realized his mistake. He might have several inches on the other man, but Eoghan packed dozens more pounds of muscle, especially considering the weight Conor had lost off his already-lean frame. Half a dozen moves, and Eoghan had Conor in an inescapable clinch, his face pressed into the dirt, sand grinding into his mouth.

"Yield?"

"Yield." Conor drew a deep breath when Eoghan released him and the weight shifted off him. He pounded his fist into the sand in frustration, only to look up and find his friend regarding him sympathetically. "Don't say it."

"You need to get back into drills with the other men—"

"I said, don't say it."

"I know you're distracted by your reunion with Aine—"

“Aine is not a distraction.” Conor shook the sand out of his tunic and retrieved his practice sword. He weighed it in his hand for a minute before tossing it back into the pile. “Unlike the reason you brought up this topic. When are you going to announce it?”

“You’re the ones who insist that I’m meant to be the High King.” Eoghan deflated, his conflict plain in his stance. “I don’t want this.”

“Just as I don’t want to be responsible for the city, but it seems that Carraigmór has chosen me as clearly as the prophecies have named you. Speaking of which, the prefects are probably waiting for me. Don’t forget the Conclave meeting this morning.” Conor picked up his sword—his real sword—and shrugged it on. Ever since the attack on Ard Dhaimhin, not a warrior went about unarmed. They could not lose a minute should their enemy decide to finish the job he started.

Conor trudged up the path from the private practice yard, noting the change in light from dawn to full day as he moved into the village proper. Wood smoke carried the scent of food on the breeze, and the faint noises from the craftsmen’s cottages said that the day’s work at Ard Dhaimhin had already begun. Thousands of people, many of them fleeing the druid’s violent anti-Balian actions in the kingdoms, and no way to provide for them. In the days after the druid had laid waste to the city, they’d made an assessment of their resources. Three-quarters of their crops burned, half of the livestock killed, the forest animals and bees gone. The fish in the lake dead, and so many of them that the Fírén hadn’t been able to salvage them. Who knew how long the city would be feeling the effects of that habitat’s destruction?

And he was responsible for it. Not just because he should have been here to intervene sooner but because he had inherited

responsibility for the city when the password of Ard Dhaimhin's secret places passed to him.

He combed his fingers through his hair in frustration. Running the city required authority, but he couldn't help but feel his was merely borrowed. Ever since he had announced to the Conclave his belief that Eoghan, not he, was destined to become the new High King, there had been an uncomfortable power shift. They still obeyed Conor's orders, but now their obedience came with a sideways look, a held breath, to see if this was the moment Eoghan would finally step up and take leadership. That he held back didn't change the fact Conor was filling a position that was not rightfully his.

Men nodded to him as he passed, but in his current mood, he wondered if their acknowledgment weren't a shade less deferential than it would be toward Eoghan.

This isn't about me, Conor told himself firmly. *This is about the future of Ard Dhaimhin, the future of Seare. And the men need to know who will be leading them when the time comes.*

The men needed the assurance that Comdiu had once again sent them their High King.

Conor changed his plans midstride. Rather than make his usual rounds through the village, he turned toward Carraigimór, the great keep on the edge of Loch Ceo, carved with forgotten technology from the massive granite rock face. He'd have just enough time to clean up and head to the Ceannaire's office before the prefects arrived with their reports. And thus would begin another long day in Ard Dhaimhin. The only bright spot was the possibility of seeing his wife for a few minutes before he started into the day's tasks. Knowing her, she'd be dressed and ready to start her work at the healers' cottage in the village below.

But when he reached their small, sparse chamber in the upper reaches of the keep, his wife still lay beneath the heavy

coverings of wool and fur, her eyes closed. A frown creased his forehead. This was unusual for her. But then, she had been working harder than anyone expected of her, putting in long hours in the village below during the daylight and then again in the keep with her stacks of books after dark.

Quietly, he poured tepid water in the basin and washed the worst of the sand and sweat from his body. As he was reaching for a clean tunic, a rustle from the bed caught his attention. Aine was watching him, a sleepy smile on her face.

“I was beginning to worry.” He sank down on the edge of the bed and propped himself on one elbow beside her.

“What time is it?”

“An hour past dawn. I just came back to change after my match with Eoghan.”

“So late?” Alarm lit her eyes, and she sat up abruptly. “What happened to your arm?”

Conor glanced down at the long red abrasion that stretched from his elbow to his wrist. He hadn’t noticed it through his annoyance. “The bout turned into something of a wrestling match, I’m afraid.”

“It might be easier if you could just talk things out.”

“Eoghan isn’t ready to talk about anything that matters.” Not about the kingship. Not about the fact the other man harbored feelings for Conor’s wife.

Maybe it was good that Eoghan’s skills surpassed his own at the moment. The mere thought made Conor want to grind him into the sand, something that was wholly inadvisable when thinking about his uncrowned king.

Conor shifted his attention instead to the book on the chair beside the bed, one he’d had to pry from her fingers when he’d returned to the chamber the night before. “Did you find anything?”

“Nothing helpful. King Daimhin didn’t even bother to date this one, though from some of the entries, I’m guessing it’s from the fourth or fifth year of his reign.”

“But nothing about the sword?”

Aine pushed back the covers and retrieved her dress from the peg beside the bed. “No, mostly just his musings about clan disputes. Thoughts on how to get his chiefs to stop squabbling and start working together against a common enemy.”

“What enemy?”

“He doesn’t say.”

Conor’s momentary hopes deflated. When they’d found the cache of journals written in Daimhin’s own hand, they’d been sure it would contain something useful about those mysteries of the kingship that still remained locked away: the sword, the Rune Throne, the wards. But in the month in which Aine had pored over the books while Conor had read through those written in foreign languages, she’d found absolutely nothing of help.

“Maybe he purposely left the details out,” Aine said. “He had no reason to think his line would die with him. Magic is typically something passed down from one generation to another.”

“And yet he rambled on about grain tallies and livestock breeding.”

“He works through his thoughts on paper, as you do with music or in the practice yard.”

Conor paused to look at her—really look at her. Not for the first time, he thought what an excellent queen she’d make. Intelligent. Insightful. More patient than any man had a right to expect. More hardworking than she had a right to expect of herself.

The shadows beneath her eyes had deepened sometime in the last few weeks, and he hadn’t even noticed. “Aine, maybe you should take some time to rest.”

“Nonsense. I’m fine.” She pulled her dress over her head and began lacing the front with brusque movements, as if he might forcibly prevent her from preparing for the day.

He remained seated and just watched her. After a few moments, she stopped and sighed. “I have to do something, Conor. I hate feeling useless, and that’s what I would be if I sat here and did nothing but read old books all day.”

He couldn’t argue with that when he felt the same way. “Just promise me you won’t work yourself to exhaustion.”

She hesitated, but at last she nodded. He kissed her lightly on the lips, donned his tunic, and steeled himself for whatever awaited him in the Ceannaire’s office.

He strode down the corridors to the other side of the keep, where Master Liam’s old study lay. The thought still brought on a pang of grief. He might have disagreed with the old Ceannaire, who had also happened to be Aine’s half brother, but Liam had helped Conor develop the skills that saved his and his wife’s life more than once. Not to mention access to knowledge that had helped him reinstate the protective wards that kept the city safe from magical incursion. The city still reeled from the loss of its leader.

When he entered the small chamber, Brother Riordan waited for him. Conor’s father had temporarily taken on leadership in the city, only to cede it to his son when he returned—just another way the chain of command in Ard Dhaimhin had been tangled since Liam’s death. “There you are. Someone said they’d seen you below before daybreak.”

“Practice match with Eoghan.”

“How’d it go?”

The look Conor gave Riordan must have said it all, because the older man chuckled. “Give yourself some time. After the treatment your body has received, some rest isn’t out of order.”

“And if the druid decides to attack again, I’ll be less than useless.”

“Losing to one of the brotherhood’s most talented swordsmen hardly qualifies you as useless. You haven’t noticed that Eoghan is spending all of his time in the training yards these days?”

Conor hadn’t, but it explained much. Maybe he wasn’t as out of shape as he thought after all. Before he could say anything, a rap sounded at the door and two men entered.

“Sir,” the first one said, bowing to Conor.

Riordan made a move toward the door, but Conor gestured to an empty chair. “Please, stay. I’d like your opinion.”

Riordan lowered himself into the seat, while the two prefects remained standing.

Conor accepted a wax tablet from the first man and scanned the notations there. “What’s the latest tally, Arlyn?”

“We’re nearly back to four thousand,” Arlyn said. “Two thousand of them warriors, the rest mainly women and children.”

Conor nodded, though his heart sank. Four thousand. That was close to the city’s population before it had been attacked, but now more than half of their food was gone. He glanced at the second man. “Your report?”

The man handed over his tablet. “Fewer incidents this week. The guards have helped, but some of the kingdom men have not taken well to the restrictions.”

“I’m sure they haven’t.” That was the problem with introducing outsiders into Ard Dhaimhin. Those men were used to a measure of freedom that was simply untenable here. The tension between the former brothers who were used to obeying without complaint and the newcomers, who by Fírén standards did nothing but complain, was only bound to escalate as their situation became more difficult.

Conor dismissed the men with a nod and leaned back in his chair. He focused on his father. “What do you think?”

“I think that you can’t expect kingdom men to uphold the same standards as the Fíreín when they haven’t had the benefit of our training or our ways of life.”

“I don’t see how we have a choice. This arrangement works only if everyone pulls their own weight. Aine has even the women and children organized to maintain the cottage gardens to supplement our supplies. If we can’t get the newcomers to work with the brothers, we’ll most certainly starve.”

“It is that dire?”

“It’s that dire.” Conor sifted through the stacks of tablets on his desk and pushed one toward Riordan. “I was going to present an updated tally to the Conclave this afternoon. We’ll run out of food before midwinter unless we find an outside source of trade. And Niall still has a stranglehold on the kingdom. Anyone found to be trading with Ard Dhaimhin is to be summarily executed.”

“If he starves us out, he doesn’t need to fight us.”

“Exactly.”

“Comdiu will provide,” Riordan said quietly, but doubt colored his tone. They both knew that being beloved of Comdiu did not exempt them from tragedy. Their Lord’s view was wide. In the scope of the entire world, who was to say He wouldn’t sacrifice the small sliver that was Seare for a greater purpose?



“Sir? They’re ready for you.”

Conor glanced up at the young brother who had poked his head into the office. It took a moment to register the honorific and a moment longer to realize what he meant. The Conclave. The meeting. He’d been so absorbed in his tallies that for a moment he’d forgotten the reason he was compiling the

information. He shrugged on his sword and gathered up several wax tablets that contained the basic information he needed to convey. With the evidence before them, the Conclave could not fail to agree with his conclusions.

The men were already gathered in Carraigmór's great hall, just barely illuminated by a single man-sized candle, another of their conservation measures. A quick glance showed that only Eoghan was missing.

They stood and bowed when Conor approached, another show of honor that rested uneasily with him. He nodded, and they all took their seats. "We're just waiting for—"

"I'm here." Eoghan entered the room and took his seat without fanfare, his placid expression hinting nothing of their argument this morning.

"Good. Brothers, you asked me for a report on the situation outside the city, and I'm afraid it's not nearly as definitive as I'd hoped." Conor sat and spread his tablets out in front of him. "It's been nearly impossible to get an accurate read on the number of men that Niall commands currently because they're spread throughout the countryside. I can only assume he is using some thread of sorcery to keep them under control and be able to summon them at a moment's notice."

"That's promising, though." Gradaigh might be the youngest member of the Conclave, but he nonetheless brought a calm, balanced perspective to their discussions. "It means that, at present, he is not marshaling his forces against us."

"We don't know that," Conor said. "Just because he doesn't have them gathered in one place doesn't mean he's not planning to attack."

"I don't see how he could." Dal, the exact opposite of Gradaigh in temperament and tone, spoke next. "Either he's commanding his men by sorcery, which means he can't enter

the city because of your shield, or he doesn't have enough nonsorcery-controlled men to be able to move against us."

"He doesn't need to," Conor said. "He's already dealt Ard Dhaimhin a deathblow."

All eyes settled on him.

Conor tugged one of the tablets nearer to him. "Our population has topped four thousand, two thousand of whom are warriors. The rest are women and children who have sought sanctuary here. At these current rates of consumption, we have about three months' worth of food stored. We still have some fall and winter crops to be harvested, and there is hunting to be had in the forests and mountains to the south of the city, but it's not nearly enough. At this rate, I'd estimate that our food stores will run out somewhere in midwinter."

"Ration," Gradaigh said immediately. "Cut the men to half."

"Which will get us to spring. And then what? Do you expect they'll be able to live on bean sprouts until summer harvest?"

"What do you suggest?" Dal shot back, his tone irritated.

Conor cleared his throat. "I'm suggesting that we look further afield."

"Leave Ard Dhaimhin, you mean. That's exactly what the druid wants—to force us out of our city, to where we are defenseless."

"Better to fight now, while the men are still strong, than to wait for an attack when they're weak from a winter of half rations. How successful do you think we'll be in defending the city, including the women and children, if the men are unable to fight?"

The men shifted uncomfortably at the table—all but Riordan, who stared at him with clear and understanding eyes. He understood the difficulty of what Conor proposed, and he understood that only desperation would drive him to the suggestion.

"What do you think the druid wants with the city anyway?" Gradaigh asked. "It's not as if there's much left."

“What he wanted in the first place, I’d think. He still wants the oath-binding sword. He still wants to eliminate Balus’s gifts. Attacking us in our weakness would go a long way to accomplishing that.”

“You’re asking us to abandon a city to which our brotherhood has pledged defense for half a millennium.” Dal’s flat tone held a distinct note of accusation.

“We’ve already changed our ways by allowing brothers to leave and opening the city to refugees,” Riordan said. “It seems to me that mere tradition is no longer an adequate argument for inaction.”

“And it seems to me that you’re awfully anxious for war.” Dal turned his scowl on Riordan. “Did you enjoy your taste of the fight so much that you’re anxious to return us to it?”

“I’ve seen enough bloodshed and destruction for a lifetime. Yet pretending that dangers don’t exist outside our borders will win us nothing.”

Conor softened his tone and tried a different tactic.

“Brothers, I’m no more anxious for war than any of you. That’s why I believe we must be slow and strategic. Attack from a position of strength, without exposing our weaknesses. If you think Niall’s desire for battle with Ard Dhaimhin was sated in a single attack, you’re wrong. He will come at us again.”

“What say you, Eoghan?” Gradaigh asked. “You’ve been quiet.”

A hush fell over the table as all eyes rested on Eoghan. Conor tensed, waiting for his response, trying not to show his irritation. Eoghan had not been involved in the gathering of this information, yet Conor instinctively knew that their uncrowned king’s opinion would hold far more weight than his own. When Eoghan finally spoke, his tone was low and measured. “I don’t want outright war.”

A few triumphant glances passed around the table.

“But you’re wrong if you believe we can stay like this

indefinitely. You chose Conor—Ard Dhaimhin chose Conor—for a reason. He speaks the truth of our situation.”

“So you think that we, too, must conquer the kingdoms?” Dal asked stiffly.

“I believe we must venture outside our city. But not now.”

The group erupted into conversation, shocked by Eoghan’s stance, but for different reasons. Conor rapped the hilt of his dagger against the table to gain their attention. Then he directed his question to Eoghan. “When, then, do you suggest we make our move? In the dead of winter, when we’ll be hampered by weather? If you understand the situation as you say you do, you know that we haven’t the food or the supplies to bide our time through another season.”

“And I know that when the time is right, Comdiu will speak.”

Conor’s breath hissed out from his teeth and he sank into the chair. He didn’t need to take a vote to know what the Conclave would decide. Conor might be the one with responsibility for the day-to-day operations of the city, but Eoghan heard the very voice of Comdiu. How could anyone argue with that?

Yet Conor was not wholly convinced Eoghan was speaking on behalf of their God. “Tell me, then. What has Comdiu said about the fact that you refuse the call to leadership?”

Eoghan’s dark gaze fixed on him, hard, dangerous even. “You question my honesty? I have said that I did not feel it was time.”

“You’ve said plenty more than that. You wish to exercise your influence as king without taking the responsibility.”

“Conor,” Riordan said softly.

Conor shook his head, aware this was a fight he could never win, despite the righteous anger boiling in his chest. Why had he expected anything different? Eoghan had been raised in Ard Dhaimhin, among men who spoke and debated and supposedly prayed for Comdiu’s will but never did anything. They stood

by and watched while Seare lost its magic, while the kingdoms were slowly overrun by an evil man, and they did nothing. Had Liam not been so stubborn, had he let them fight, perhaps Niall wouldn't even be in power now.

"I take it you're all in favor of waiting?" Conor asked.

"Let's put it to a vote," Daigh said. "In favor of revisiting the situation in another month, say aye."

"Aye."

"Opposed?"

"Opposed," Conor and Riordan said simultaneously. He met his father's eyes and gave him a swift nod.

"The ayes have it. Master Conor, if you would present any new information in one month—"

Conor pushed away from the table and gathered his tablets, not waiting to hear the rest of the conversation. He stalked from the room, fury trembling in his limbs. He was halfway back to the Ceannaire's study when Eoghan's voice rang out behind him. "Conor, please wait."

He stopped and turned. Eoghan walked toward him, his palms turned forward in a gesture of truce. "I don't want this to turn into a battle between us."

"That's the problem, Eoghan. This has nothing to do with us. This has to do with the well-being of four thousand people for whom we, as leaders, are responsible."

"What would you have me do? Do you think I have not begged Comdiu for the answer to this very question? He has not spoken to me. I take that to mean we wait. Comdiu's timing is not always our timing."

"I'm sure the mothers in the village will find that to be a comfort as they watch their children starve to death," Conor said. "Because that's what this decision means. A failure to act means death, just as the brotherhood's failure to act in the war

meant the death of countless of our countrymen, including Aine's family."

Eoghan studied him closely. "Is this what this is really about? Revenge? Aine would not want men to die in vengeance for her family."

"I thought you knew me better than that, Eoghan. When you can bring yourself to embrace your calling, then we can talk. Until then, I have work to do."

Conor kept his pace deliberate, measured, willing Eoghan to stay behind. Should he follow him, Conor couldn't guarantee it wouldn't come to blows. Besides, he didn't have time for futile arguments. He had mere weeks to put together a more compelling case for action, one that even Eoghan and his claim to know Comdiu's will couldn't sink.

Conor might have been rejected as king, but he had been chosen as leader of Ard Dhaimhin. He would not fail them.