

OATH

of the

BROTHERHOOD

a novel

C. E. LAUREANO

THE SONG  OF SEARE



“Oath of the Brotherhood is a beautifully crafted allegory about finding one’s gifts and purpose. C. E. Laureano has contributed a simply enchanting page-turner to the fantasy genre. I was delighted to discover it and disappointed it ended so soon. *Song of Seare* is a promising new fantasy series with a vast storyworld that hints at more wonder to come. I loved this book!”

JILL WILLIAMSON

Christy Award–winning author of *By Darkness Hid* and *Captives*

“C. E. Laureano’s *Oath of the Brotherhood* is a wonderfully entertaining tale of magic and heroism, betrayal and triumph. With its Gaelic flavor and engaging characters, it will have you turning pages long after the real world tries to call you away. I particularly enjoyed the author’s deft handling of the main character’s romance. Nicely done!”

PATRICK W. CARR

Author of *The Staff and the Sword*

“Rich with Celtic lore, battle, and competing magics, *Oath of the Brotherhood* is a heroic coming-of-age fantasy experience and an inspiring series opener.”

SERENA CHASE

Author of the *Eyes of E’veria* YA fantasy series, and contributor to *USA Today’s* Happy Ever After blog

“C. E. Laureano dips her quill in the fantasy genre with the deft skill of a master! *Oath of the Brotherhood* captivates and defies the norm, wrenching readers from the boredom of overdone plots. You’ll laugh, you’ll cheer, you’ll wish you could ward against

the real world so you can read that next paragraph! With rich characters, killer plot twists, and an incredible storyworld, *Oath of the Brotherhood* will live in the hearts of its readers long after the last page is turned!”

RONIE KENDIG

Bestselling, award-winning author of the Discarded Heroes and A Breed Apart series

“C. E. Laureano has crafted a richly detailed dark-ages epic that will captivate fantasy lovers.”

R. J. LARSON

Books of the Infinite

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For N and P.

May you find the path God has for you and follow it fearlessly.

You are capable of greater things than you can imagine.

ISLE OF AMANTA



ISLE OF SEARE





CHAPTER ONE

The mist hung from the branches of the ancient trees like threads from a tattered banner, though the last vestiges of sunlight still glimmered on the horizon. Conor Mac Nir shivered atop his horse and tugged his cloak securely around him, then regretted the show of nerves. He had already seen the disdain in the eyes of the king's men sent to escort him. There was no need to give them reason to doubt his courage as well.

A weathered, scarred man on a dun stallion made his way from the back of the column and fell in beside him: Labhrás Ó Maonagh, Conor's foster father.

"It's too quiet," Labhrás said, his gaze flicking to the dark recesses of the forest. "The animals have gone to ground—they sense the unnatural. Keep your eyes open."

The twenty warriors quickened their pace, battle-hardened hands straying to their weapons for reassurance. Conor gripped his reins tighter. Now he understood the comfort a sword brought. Not that it would be of any use to him. He would be no help against dangers of the human kind, let alone whatever lurked in the mist.

He felt no relief when the road broke away from the trees, revealing the first glimpse of Glenmallaig's earthen ramparts and the stone dome of the keep within. The mist had already found a foothold, wreathing the top of the walls and giving the impression they stretched unendingly skyward. The moat's stale waters lapped at the base of the walls. Glenmallaig made no pretensions about being anything but a fortress, solid and impregnable.

"Steady now," Labhrás murmured.

Conor drew a deep breath. Few knew how much he dreaded this homecoming, but Labhrás was one. Other men might have taken the honor and considerable financial rewards of fostering King Galbraith's son without a thought to the responsibility it entailed, but Lord Labhrás had raised him as he would have brought up his own child. By contrast, the king had not shown a shred of interest in Conor for his entire seventeen years.

He swallowed hard and tried to disappear into the folds of his cloak as the drawbridge descended toward the bank. The leader of their escort gave a terse signal, and the procession lurched forward amidst a thunder of hooves on timber. Conor shuddered as he passed into Glenmallaig's courtyard, a wash of cold blanketing his skin—too cold, considering the fast-approaching spring. The carts carrying Labhrás's tribute to the king clattered across behind them, and the bridge once again crept upward.

Inside the courtyard, wood smoke and burning pitch drifted on the air, stinging his nose. It should have been a welcoming vignette, but the orange firelight only cast the mist-filled courtyard in a sickly yellow glow. Conor cast a glance over his shoulder just as the drawbridge thudded shut, sealing off the life he'd left behind him.

Foolish thoughts. Conor shook them off as he dismounted and winced at the twinge in his muscles as they adjusted to solid

ground. A hand on his elbow steadied him, the iron grip incongruous with its owner's graying hair and finely lined face.

"Home at last," Dolan said under his breath, a tinge of irony in his voice. More than merely a devoted retainer, the manservant had become a friend and confidant over the nine years of Conor's fosterage at Balurnan. Dolan knew better than anyone the fears Conor's return stirred within him.

A pale, skeletal man descended the steps of the double-door entry, headed for the captain. After a moment of quiet conversation, he strode in their direction with a cautious smile. Conor squinted, then drew a sharp breath. The last time he had seen Marcan, the steward of Glenmallaig had been in the bloom of good health, commanding the household with a mere word. Now his clothing hung from a gaunt frame, and shadows marked the pale skin beneath his eyes. Surely the mere passage of time couldn't have effected such a transformation.

"Welcome, my lord Conor," Marcan said with a bow, his voice as calm and capable as ever. "Your old chamber has been prepared for you. Come."

Dolan gave him a nudge, and, reluctantly, Conor followed Marcan up the front steps into the great hall. Torches threw flickering light on the cavernous room, from its rush-covered floor to the curve of the ceiling, though they could not quite dispel the shadows at its apex. Conor's gaze settled on four unfamiliar men standing before the dais that held the king's throne. From their elaborately embroidered clothing, he guessed three of them to be lords of the realm. The fourth's clean-shaven head and plain robes marked him as a cleric.

The priest turned, revealing the black tattoos that etched his neck and curled up behind his ear. Conor halted as he met the piercing blue gaze, unable to summon the will to move. The sensation of a thousand insects scrambled over his skin.

Lord Labhrás's solid form cut off his view, breaking his trance. "Take Conor to his chamber," Labhrás told Dolan. "I'll be up directly." Only when the servant took Conor by the shoulders and turned him down the adjacent corridor did he realize he was trembling.

Who was the man? And what had just happened? Conor struggled for breath as they ascended a long flight of stairs, a pang of foreboding striking deep in his gut. He gave his head a sharp shake to clear away the sluggishness. Only once he was halfway up the stairs did he regain enough clarity to survey his surroundings.

They looked completely unfamiliar.

He glanced behind him to the hall to reassure himself they hadn't detoured while he was in a daze, but no . . . this was the main staircase to the upper floor. He must have traveled this very path thousands of times, both in his early years at fosterage and in his visits back home.

Why couldn't he remember it?

Marcan stopped near the top of the stairs and pushed a door open. "Here we are, just as you left it. Your trunks are being brought up now, and I'll send the boys in to fill the tub."

Conor stepped inside, expecting a rush of recognition, but this room felt just as foreign as the stairway. Faded tapestries dampened both the chill and the echo from the stone walls. Fine woolen blankets and a wolf's pelt covered the shelf bed on one end, and a single chair with a threadbare cushion stood beside the carved oak armoire. Opposite it, a wooden bathing tub waited, already half-filled with water.

The door banged open to admit four of the keep's servants, each pair carrying a heavy wooden trunk between them. They plunked them unceremoniously near the door, then escaped into the corridor without a bow or even a nod.

Dolan scowled at their backs, then turned to the trunks and loosened the leather straps on the nearest one. He immediately began to unpack Conor's garments with practiced efficiency, shaking out the wrinkles before he hung them in the wardrobe.

Conor watched Dolan work for several minutes. "Who were the men in the hall?"

"Three of them were minor lords."

"And the fourth?"

Only the slightest pause in the servant's movements betrayed his discomfort with the question. "Unless I miss my guess, there is a druid once more at Glenmallaig."

Conor sank onto the edge of the bed, his breath catching in his throat. *A druid.* They were not uncommon in the kingdom of Tigh. Most were quiet, contemplative men, content to remain isolated in the nemetons until they were called upon to perform the rites of Tigh's gods and goddesses at the quarter year or to tender folk cures for ailments. Conor had come across their kind outside Balurnan, and while the Balianes denounced their pagan ways, few could perform any magic beyond benign hearth charms.

Yet this druid's suffocating presence said he was no harmless earth wizard. Conor had grown up hearing stories of the Red Druids, blood mages of immense power that counseled kings and led men in battle. Could this man be one of them? Did the Red Druids even still exist, outside of history and bards' tales?

Before he could voice his thoughts, a light knock at the door announced the arrival of two boys with steaming buckets of water in each hand.

"Bathe," Dolan said, while the boys emptied the water into the tub. "I'll go fetch your supper. Lord Labhrás should be up soon."

Conor smiled his thanks, though food was the last thing on his mind. It was bad enough he was about to face his father and explain why he had not yet laid hands on a sword. Now

he might have to contend with a Red Druid, whose kind were notorious and ruthless inquisitors, a man who looked at him as if he already knew Conor's most dangerous secret.

He forced down his unease and stripped off his travel-stained garments. His skin prickled, but a quick glance over his shoulder assured him the door remained closed. He slid quickly into the bath's meager concealment. *Breathe. They couldn't know.* Labhrás had been careful. No books of Scripture or religious symbols had come with them, and Dolan's discretion was unquestionable.

If the king found out, it would take only a whisper to destroy Labhrás's status in the kingdom. Galbraith may have relaxed the restrictions on Balianism during his reign, but not so long ago, adherence to the forbidden faith would have landed their severed heads beside the keep's gate. Even now, Balian converts did not retain possession of their lands and titles for long.

Lord Balus, protect us, Conor prayed silently, not daring to give voice to the words. *May You be the shield between us and our enemies. May You be the Light that guides our path. May everything we do further the work of Your kingdom.*

He let out a long, shuddering sigh and sank further into the warm water, concentrating on moving his breath in and out of his lungs. Inch by inch, he forced his mind away from his worries. He could not afford to seem afraid here. To show any discomfort would only make them wonder what he was hiding.

Conor.

He sat bolt upright in the bath, sloshing water over the sides. He whipped his head around, looking for the source of the whispered voice.

I know what you conceal, Conor. Soon, they all will. I can protect you.

Gooseflesh prickled his skin, and the warm water turned cold. "Who's there? Show yourself!"

Join me, Conor. You'll be safe . . .

He jerked awake with a yelp and slid underwater before he even realized he had fallen asleep. He surfaced, spluttering, to find Labhrás watching him from the doorway.

The older man's lips twitched. "Taking a swim?"

Conor blinked. Steam still rose from the surface of the water, and the floor beside the tub was dry. A dream. Just a dream.

He shook his head with a self-conscious laugh. "Not intentionally." He wrung water from his tangled hair and reached for the cloth beside the tub. Only once he had dried himself off and tugged a clean linen shirt over his head did he dare voice his question. "Is it true? Is there a druid at Glenmallaig?"

Labhrás nodded and sat down on the bed. "His name's Diarmuid. He's been present at court for at least a year, though I'd be surprised if he hasn't had an influence for longer than that. I don't need to tell you—"

"—the less he knows of us, the better? No. That one I figured out for myself."

Labhrás sighed. "There are things we must discuss, Conor, but they are not topics for tonight. Eat, try to get some sleep. We'll speak tomorrow."

"Aye, my lord." Conor knew better than to press him, even though there was little chance he could put any of this out of his mind tonight. He watched his foster father move to the door and then called out, "Lord Labhrás?"

"Aye, Conor?"

"I don't remember this place. Any of it. My chamber, the hall. . . . It's only been three years. I should remember something, shouldn't I?"

He expected Labhrás to reassure him, to tell him he had been grieving his mother when they last visited Glenmallaig, too young to remember anything before that. Instead, Labhrás met

his eyes seriously. “Aye, you should remember something. Good night, lad.”

Conor exhaled heavily and scrubbed his hands over his face. Nothing about this trip felt right. Not the escort, not the mist, not the druid’s presence. He was not foolish enough to assume any of it was connected—not yet—but he knew with certainty he was far out of his depth.