

# WHISPERING CANE

by

Carol Severance

Sionna remained silent throughout the long funeral. She watched dry-eyed as her newborn daughter was lowered into the ground. Not even the setting of a mourning spell over the small grave caused her to reveal her tightly suppressed rage. The men guarding her murmured when the priestess Tammon's touch brought a flicker of light, then the faint green shadow of newly sprouting grass across the mound, but at their warlord's order, they did nothing to stop the harmless locking spell.

They could have, Sionna knew, for their leader, Keron, a man who had once been a trusted neighbor, was now partnered with a great evil. Whether the source of his Power had come from within his own lands in Rimsdale or from somewhere in the Waste beyond, Sionna did not know, but it counteracted easily the various light spells her own people employed. Even the new grass that now sealed her daughter's grave seemed stunted and dry.

Sionna brushed her fingers across her lips in the sign of farewell and remained silent.

When the ceremony was finished, she left the others and walked alone into the sugarcane fields. The guards let her go,

they were that certain of her loyalty to Lelanin, and of their own ability to stop her should she try to leave the valley. The only exit was by sea.

She slipped through the cane until she reached a small clearing not far from the road. It was silent except for the ceaseless rustling of the cane. Sionna loosed her long black hair, then knelt and dug a hole in the loose, porous soil, scooping out dirt until the opening was as deep as her arms could reach. She leaned across the hole—and screamed.

Again and again Sionna screamed, emptying into the hole all the pain and torment of her daughter's birth and the incredible horror of her death so soon after. She thought of the baby's father, her beloved Tersan, dead now at the Alizonians' hands, and her father and brother, and so many of the men from Lelanin Valley. She screamed her hatred into the ground, then wept when she thought again of her child.

She forced herself to hear again the baby's first cries, watch as the tiny eyes blinked open, then squeezed shut against the light. She stiffened as she felt again the sudden terror as the strain of afterbirth began. It was as if she were giving birth a second time, the force was so intense. Terror wrapped around her like a living thing, and she felt as if her soul were being torn from her.

The baby wailed and Sionna tried to reach out to her, but the air turned gray all around and she couldn't breathe. She gasped and the gray turned to dark. When she was at last able to move and see again, she remembered that she was at the mourning hole, not back in the birthing room where Tammon and the midwife and Keron's guard, whom he had insisted be present, had stood staring dazedly at her daughter. The babe had been blue and shriveled, as empty of life as if she'd never known it.

"Stillborn," the guard had whispered, and he had made a warding sign and run from the room.

"She was alive!" Sionna screamed into the ground. "My daughter was alive and she was murdered!" She cried out her rage and her hatred of Keron and his outlaw invaders, for she knew that only the most evil of warborn sorcery could have entered that birthing room. The children of her family were Lelanin itself, protected by their trace of the Old Ones' blood, they were always born with strength and good health.

Sionna screamed until her voice cracked and her throat was raw, until no sound would come. Then she wept, sobbing against the cool ground so that her tears, too, could sink into the fertile soil.

When her mind was dulled and empty, when she felt nothing but her fury's finely honed edge, Sionna refilled the hole. She worked quickly, scooping with both hands until the ground was level again. Leaning forward, she blew softly across the burial site to set a proper mourning spell and seal her grief underground. She waited until the shadow of new grass had spread across the freshly dug earth, then pulled one of the tall cane stalks down. She broke the tassel from its tip and pressed it into the loose soil.

"I am Lelanin," she whispered. Her breathless voice was indistinguishable from the rustling cane, but she was sure that the Guardians heard.

Sionna pointedly ignored Keron's men posted along the road back to the village, although more than one of them sniggered and commented rudely on the dirt that smeared her hands and clothing. She glanced instead toward the charred remains of small family shrines standing on hillocks throughout the valley. Keron had ordered them all destroyed, even after she'd sworn that the places were not repositories of magic, only sites where the Lelanin people honored their dead.

Tammon met her at the village gate. "You should be abed," she said. The elderly priestess had cared for Sionna since she was a child and had she been allowed her way, Sionna would still be secluded in the birthing house. Sionna merely shook her head and accepted the old woman's supporting arm. Her legs felt as if they were made of cane syrup, thick and heavy, soft enough to melt into the ground. It was beyond belief that they had carried both her and the child just two days before.

"There is no need for you to be about this soon. The valley people would understand," Tammon said.

Sionna sighed. Tammon's words were true, but she knew she could not hide away. She must continue performing her traditional duties or risk losing the small advantage her status currently provided. And there was still the funeral supper to endure.

She bathed and changed, and rested for a time, then walked

to the village hall where the valley nobles had already gathered. On this night of mourning, the nobles had each worn their clans' colors to honor the last of their valley's heirs to carry full Lelanin blood. Sionna nodded her thanks as she entered and touched her lips in silent greeting.

Keron sat with three of his outlaw-warriors at the head table. He wore the feathered crest that proclaimed him a high chieftain, and Sionna wished for an instant that she had taken the time to don her own elaborate headpiece. Then she decided that in this company, she was better off without it. Keron's crest made it appear he needed to prove his rank, while there was no question of hers. Even Keron's men stood as she passed, though only the valley folk touched their lips in response to her greeting.

Keron, too, rose from his bench, surprising Sionna with his adherence to local custom. He surprised her again by offering her her rightful place as Lelanin's liege. She hated him even more for giving her reason to hate him less.

Keron had publicly demanded that Sionna wed him and bear him a child as soon as she was able, so that Keron could legally wear the Lelanin crest. It would establish him as the seat of power in these far southern lands, for Lelanin provided the source of the vital seed stock for the sugarcane trade.

For centuries, Lelanin had traded peacefully with Keron's forebears in Rimsdale, shipping cane from the hidden valley through a sea passage known only to the Rimsdale and Lelanin lords. It was a pact made by the first dwellers in these isolated lands, those who had lived together here for a time with the Old Ones. Even the Sulcar traders who bought the cane from Rimsdale did not know the secret entrance to Lelanin Bay.

But after his father and elder brother had died, Keron had broken that ages-old trust, taking advantage of Lelanin's weakness with so many of her own men lost. The Dales had never been ruled by any one lord and with so much land now in chaos, it had been easy for Keron to gather an army of outlaws and criminals, deserters and men who had no other lord to follow. Some, it was rumored, had joined him from their homes in the Waste.

Keron had killed any Rimsdale man who spoke against his

plans of conquest before he and the most bloodthirsty of his followers slipped into Lelanin Bay. Accepting guest right from Sionna, he established a hold upon the keep before revealing his evil plans to her. Fighting off what small resistance there was from old men and women and children, his men took over the cane fleet and sent it back through the passage for the rest of his invading army. Sionna wished to weep at the thought of what those evil men would do when they arrived.

"Why doesn't the lady speak?" one of Keron's men asked as the funeral meal neared its end. "They say she's not made a sound since the child was born dead two days ago, not even to weep."

"The valley people share their grief with the soil that feeds them," Tammon said. "They don't waste it on strangers."

"A stupid custom," a second warrior murmured, "burying your grief. Better to get out in the open and be rid of it."

"Better not to have it at all," the third warrior said with a laugh.

"Is it true, Priestess," Keron asked, "that your people believe that incessant rustling in the cane fields is their ancestors' voices whispering ancient troubles from their graves?"

His words brought a sudden stinging to Sionna's eyes. Was her own pain now whispering among the cane? She wondered if that last tiny cry of her child had found a place among the wind-blown leaves. She lowered her gaze quickly and felt the thin fabric of her mourning shawl split under the strain of her clenched hands.

"Do not mock her grief," Tammon snapped. She touched Sionna, a brush of gnarled fingers across smooth skin. It added to the pain, though Sionna knew the old woman meant to offer comfort.

"She'd best deal with her grief soon, old woman," Keron said. "My army will arrive tomorrow and I want her decision by then."

"Decision, Warlord?" Tammon spat across her shoulder, narrowly missing the edge of the warlord's cape. "She must marry you and produce a legal heir or be raped to achieve the same end. What kind of decision is that?"

Keron stared at the spittle for a moment, eyes narrowing.

"There's another choice, old woman." He pulled a broad sword from the scabbard on his back. A stone, red as spilt blood, gleamed on its hilt. "I can simply destroy the entire valley and all within it."

"It doesn't take much courage to murder old women and newborn babies," Tammon said.

Keron lifted the sword, held it crosswise between them, and blew a puff of air across the blade. Tammon staggered back in her seat, cried out in choking pain. Her gnarled hands lifted in useless defense.

Keron laughed and lowered the sword.

"You think that you're safe because your ancestors made a pact with the Old Ones," he said. "Well, Priestess, the Old Ones are long gone from this land, and I have made a pact with forces far greater than your simple magic can control." The stone on his sword grew brighter. "Try me again, Priestess. Let me show you just what I can do."

"Aunt, do not provoke him," Sionna said before Tammon could respond. "Your anger is better spent in the fields."

She turned on the warlord.

"If you can't control yourself better than this, Keron, you might as well lay waste to the valley right now. Lelanin under such childish rule would be chaos. The cane will die without the people to care for it, and without the cane, even the Sulcars would have no use for this part of the coast. You would be lord over a dead and useless land."

Keron lifted his sword again, but when Sionna made no move to protect herself, he cursed and dropped the blade back into its scabbard.

"This is a night for mourning, not playing with swords and insults," Sionna said. "I declare the meal finished." She stood, took Tammon's trembling hand in her own, and left the hall.

"I have already lost a daughter to that butcher, Aunt, and a father and brothers to the Alizonians," she said when they were alone in her chambers. "I do not wish to lose you as well."

"He must be stopped," Tammon said. She sat on the wide bed, leaning heavily against the bedpost. She had still not entirely caught her breath.

"Goading him into killing you will not accomplish that end,"

Sionna said. She walked to a window overlooking the cane fields. Outside the windblown tassels shimmered like seawater in the moonlight. The sweet smell of fertile soil and night-blooming ginger drifted on the warm air. Lifting a long, thin knife from beside a fruit-filled bowl, Sionna thrust it through the woven dust mats into the solid wooden sill. She took a deep breath and spoke again.

"We cannot face Keron's army with cane knives and pitchforks, though the people have offered to try. And our magic, based as it is on peaceful interactions with the gods, is useless against Keron's Shadow-based sorcery. That horror draws on all the hatred and pain of each of his warrior's years of violence and only grows stronger as his conquests continue. You saw the red stone in his sword?"

Tammon nodded, her face twisted in remembered pain. "That's no ordinary gem. I could almost smell its evil the moment he unsheathed the sword. He boasted of making a pact with some dark force. That must be the talisman of his alliance."

Sionna shifted her gaze from the place where her child was buried to that where her grief was interred. Tammon joined her at the window. She caught at her niece's hand.

"There is only one way to stop that kind of power."

There were tears in Sionna's eyes when she turned back. "We can't defend the valley without help and there is none outside to offer us aid. Had my daughter lived, we might have . . ." She shook her head, swiped angrily at the tears. "Lelanin won't last a year under Keron's rule. The land itself will be destroyed."

She turned again toward the shimmering cane fields. "And we are the land, Aunt. You and I. It is the gift and the trust the Old Ones left us. We are Lelanin and we must defend the valley."

Tammon touched her hand. "There is a thousand years of buried pain out there in those fields," the priestess said. "A thousand years of Lelanin sorrows, great and small. If you free that force, there could be chaos."

Sionna met her aunt's troubled stare. "Better a chaos of our own making than one born of Keron's evil. Will you help me?"

Tammon's chin lifted. A slow, rueful smile spread across her aged features. "With cane knives and pitchforks if I must, Niece."

By midmorning the following day the village was nearly empty. Sionna explained to Keron that the prime upland fields were ripe for harvest and even the children were needed to help cut and haul the cane. The minor priests and priestesses were seeing to the last of the funeral rites, so only she and Tammon were free to dine with their guest.

Keron grunted and straightened his shoulders, visibly pleased to have been referred to as "guest." He sat between the two women on a hillock overlooking the bay. Two guards stood some way off, not included in this private luncheon.

"I assume that you have reached a suitable decision?" he said.

"I have," she replied. She dropped her gaze to her plate and selected a last bit of meat. Chewing it slowly, she shifted her gaze to the sunlit sea.

Tammon speared a ripe lichee with the point of her knife and lifted it from the low table. She peeled the leathery skin and bit into the juicy white pulp. When she was finished, she laid the knife beside her plate. "So," she said, leaning to one side so the juice could drip on the ground, "when do you expect your fleet, mighty warrior?"

"You have the tongue of an eel, Priestess," Keron replied dryly.

Tammon licked her fingers calmly.

"They have come," Sionna said. She pointed seaward, where a ship could be seen rounding the northern tip of the bay. Keron jumped up just as the cry came from below that the fleet had been sighted. He stood, fists on his hips, grinning, as the cane barges, filled with his men, worked their way into the sheltered waters of Lelanin Bay. Tammon glanced at Sionna, passed her the knife, then rose to stand beside the warlord.

"It is an impressive sight," Tammon said. She moved to Keron's opposite side and asked him about his men and their origins. As Keron boasted of his warriors' bloody past, Tammon wandered slowly about, circling the warlord twice over. When she had completed the third circuit, she nodded to



Sionna, and in that instant, Sionna felt the warding spell settle softly into place. She rose and slipped silently away.

As soon as she was free of the hillock, Sionna raced for the place where she had cried the afternoon before. It was not far off, they had chosen their luncheon site with care. She pushed through the rustling cane, growing more and more conscious of the indistinct voices whispering among the wind-tossed leaves. The voices seemed louder, more powerful, than she remembered, as if they were eager for what was to come.

A small fire, cradled carefully in a stone-lined depression, awaited her at the clearing. It had been laid that morning by a kinsman on his way to another such place known only to those of true Lelanin blood.

Sionna lifted a torch from beside the fire and set its oily tip into the heat. She waited until the flames whooshed, then burned strong and steady. Then she turned back to the burial site.

Sionna knew her next move would mean her own death before this day was finished. Only a female of the ruling line could unseal the ground and call forth the ancestors. And when her work was complete, the one who had opened the ground must lead them back to the fields and join them underground.

"I do not wish to die," she whispered to the rustling cane. "But Keron must be stopped before he destroys this land. We have lived in peace for many centuries because we remain hidden to all but our nearest neighbors, and we care for the land according to the wishes of our ancestors. We bury all that is hateful and harmful to us, seal it under the ground where its strength can be used by the Guardians to nourish the soil and provide the seed stock upon which we depend."

Sionna wept to think that those who survived this day, if any did, would have to establish a new ruling family line for the valley—a family line that would no longer carry any trace of the Old Ones' blood in its veins. Only her aged aunt would remain. Sionna plucked a strand of her hair—it was ebony, shiny and smooth, her legacy from that ancient and inexplicable past—and held it up to the wind. She took comfort in knowing that at least the family chosen to take the place of her own would carry

no Keron blood. She loosed the hair and it drifted away to tangle in the cane.

She brushed away her tears, then brushed away the crushed cane tassel that she had pressed into the soil the day before. She spat upon the place where it had been. "Open," she said, as simply as if she were preparing a grave for one of Lelanin's dead. Instantly, the grass began to shrivel. It quickly turned brown and brittle, dead and as cold as her infant daughter lying beneath her own seal of grass. There was a hush in the cane.

Sionna stood and pulled the knife from her belt. Holding the hilt in both hands, she lifted the blade high into the air.

"I am Lelanin!" she cried as loud as she could. The voices in the cane remained still for a moment more, then rustled again as she cried out a second time.

"I am Lelanin. Be free Lelanin, aid me in defending this land."

She swung her blade down, sliced it deeply into the ground. It slid through the fine, rich soil as easily as if it were cutting through flesh. The earth shivered, the air wavered. Sionna called out again and struck the earth a second blow. The voices in the cane grew louder.

Soil as red as blood began bubbling from the cuts. Sionna slashed her long, thin blade through the earth again and again, until the ground was afroth with roiling soil. Then she jumped back, grabbed the firebrand, and began torching the cane.

The flames licked eagerly at the dry leaves, thick black smoke billowed upward with the same turbulent motion as the soil. Sionna stabbed her knife into the ground once more, very deeply, then pulled the blade free. Glancing to her right, then her left, she saw other patches of smoke lifting from fields all across the valley. Her own fire had been the signal for other families to open their fields. The defense of Lelanin had begun.

As she raced back through the shivering cane, she saw a thin tendril of pale smoke rising from the site of her daughter's grave. She frowned, wondering who might have lit that unexpected fire. Behind her, she heard her ancestors cackle and begin to roar.

Keron's fleet was anchoring by the time Sionna reached the hillock where she had left Tammon and the Rimsdale lord.

Many of the ship's small boats had been beached and their crews milled like maggots around the edges of the village. Two houses were already in flames. Sionna brushed her fingers across her lips at Tammon's questioning look. Tammon stepped away from Keron, then sat cross-legged on the pile of mats. Sionna dropped the knife into her aunt's eager hands.

Suddenly Keron blinked and shook his head, freed from the warding spell he'd not known was upon him. It had been a calculated risk, he could have broken the spell easily had he realized his entire attention was being kept on his fleet by unnatural means. But the ruse had worked. He was not aware that Sionna had left the hillock, though he looked somewhat confused at Tammon's position on the mat.

"You said the village would be spared," Sionna said to divert him.

"You can't expect my soldiers to come ashore without a ripple, lady," he said. "They've been waiting for many weeks and looking forward to battle all that time. They deserve a bit of fun."

"At the expense of my people," Sionna said.

"Our people," Keron replied with a grin.

"Ah, the fabled Rimsdale manners," Tammon said, drawing his attention away from both Sionna and the thin tendrils of smoke that had begun to drift seaward from the cane fields. If the warlord looked behind him now, he would realize that not all the smoke in the air was coming from the houses his warriors had torched. Great pillars of inky black were rising all across the valley. The air was filling with the cloying smell of burning sugar. Tammon ran her fingers along the knife blade. Scratches and nicks appeared under her touch and she held it up as if to inspect the damage closer.

"That's a sorry weapon you carry, Priestess," Keron said.

"It's a Rimsdale blade," she said sourly. "I had it made at your father's forge not a year ago."

"That's no . . ."

But the blade did indeed suddenly appear to be wider and double-edged as was the Rimsdale style.

"What are you—?" The warlord coughed. "Damn this

smoke!" He turned, caught sight of the black pall that now covered the entire upper end of the valley.

"It's only the cane fields," Sionna said quickly. Her voice was strained though she faced the warlord calmly enough. She could feel the forces gathering within her, waiting for her to focus them according to her will. "It's a harvest day. They're burning off the stubble to kill any harmful pests."

"Lelanin's had trouble with pests lately," Tammon said.

Keron threw her a disgusted look and sent his guards into the village. "Tell the men to spread out and find the villagers," he ordered. "Gather them in one place where they can be watched—kill them if necessary." Sionna lifted a hand to her mouth and a puff of smoke circled the warlord. He coughed again.

"What are you up to, woman?" he growled, turning back to her. "Some damn Lelanin magic, no doubt." She lifted her hand to her mouth again. He stopped, coughing so hard he had to bend over in the effort to clear his lungs. Straightening suddenly, he yanked his sword from its place on his back. The crimson stone gleamed.

"It won't work," he rasped. "No sweet-smelling Lelanin magic can withstand my war curse." He whirled his sword in the air and uttered a series of sharp, shrill notes. Instantly, his warriors picked up the cry and the valley suddenly echoed with the shrill ululation. The smoke that had settled around the warlord hesitated, thickened, then lifted sullenly and slid back toward the cane fields. The tendrils that had reached the war fleet began drifting away on the natural lines of the sea wind.

Keron laughed. "You see, lady? You have no defense. There is no way you can overcome my strength. I'd have thought you would have learned that in the birthing room. This valley is mine!"

Sionna lifted her hands before her face and screamed.

"I am Lelanin!" she cried. "Be free Lelanin, aid me in defending this land."

Tammon, too, lifted her hands and echoed Sionna's words. All across the valley, voices were suddenly raised, faint at first, almost indistinguishable above the sound of Keron's booming laughter. But the voices grew in number and then in volume,

until the sounds of endless anguished men and women and children billowed from the cane fields like the smoke before them. The voices slid through the heavy air like sharks seeking prey.

Keron's men cried out in confusion as the voices multiplied, as the sounds separated into screams and shrieks of deafening intensity. The warriors drew their weapons, but as a thousand and more years of buried pain struck their souls, they dropped their swords and knives and began screaming themselves.

Proud warriors pressed their hands over their ears and fell to their knees. Tears sprang into their eyes as their souls were filled with the pain and agony of generations of Lelanin people. It was not the depth of evil in the pain, for many of the warriors had caused and witnessed things far worse in their lifetimes than any valley dweller ever had. They were undone by sheer volume, by the seething accumulated agony of hundreds, thousands of Lelanin souls, freed at last from the carefully nurtured fields of the Old Ones.

Men tore at their hair and scratched their own skin trying to escape the terrible despair. One pulled his dagger and thrust it into his eye to end the chilling horror. A few, those whose souls were already dead from a lifetime of rape and murder, clung to their swords and fought with the old men and the women and the children who appeared suddenly and silently among them. Pitchforks and cane knives took a deadly toll.

Keron watched the destruction of his troops in shock. He tried to stop the onslaught with his shrill war curse, but his warriors could not hear his call and failed to join him in fighting the unseen enemy. Keron called on all the gods he knew, directed spell after spell into the carnage below, and still his warriors died.

Finally, he turned in fury to the two women who shared the hillock. The priestess had sunk to the ground as if she too were being attacked by the screaming voices. But Sionna stood in rigid concentration, her fingers lightly covering her opened lips. Power streaked like living flames from her hands to the carnage below.

"I will kill you!" Keron shrieked. He lifted his blade.

"You'll have to kill me first," Tammon cried. She pushed herself up and threw herself at the warlord. The knife she held

was long and thin again, without blemish save for a light dusting of valley soil.

Keron cursed and swung at her. His blade sliced through her shoulder, but her knife slid along his wrist as she fell.

Sionna turned then and lifted one hand toward the warlord. He glanced at his wrist, shook it as if it stung, then gasped as Sionna's wave of anguish struck him. He lifted the sword, shouted one of his foul war spells, and fought the heartbreaking pain back. Sionna flinched, then straightened and lifted a second hand. She opened her soul and flung at him all the hatred and fear and grief that his very existence had brought into her life. Still he twisted away from her mental grasp, ripping at her horror and thrusting it back upon her doubled.

In desperation, Sionna called again upon her ancestors. "I am Lelanin!" she screamed, and they answered with screeching rage. Keron staggered back, lifted his flaring sword, and shouted yet another of his counterspells. Sionna was thrown to the ground by its force. She knew then that the battle was lost, that he would kill her and all her people, for nothing in Lelanin's history had created enough horror and pain to match this man's evil soul and that of the Power with which he was allied.

Suddenly Sionna saw a thin, pale tendril of smoke approach the warlord. She heard a soft cry, the tiny wail of a newborn infant. She reached for the sound, wanting desperately to lock that one remembered moment of joy into her heart. But the child's wail slipped from her grasp. It grew and swelled as it circled the warlord. Around, and around, and around. It trapped Keron in its innocent fury, crushed him with the pain of its own ensorceled death. It was the cry of a child who had wanted to live.

Keron slipped to his knees and tried to block the sound by covering his ears with his hands. The red stone flickered, darkened. The child wailed on and the stone turned muddy black and dripped from the weapon's hilt like the blood of one damned. The sword fell useless at Keron's side.

A tremendous quiet settled across the valley. Only the warlord's ragged breathing and the shrill wail of the child could be heard. And then only an infant's soft whimper as Tammon thrust her thin knife into Keron's side.

Sionna shuddered and sank to the ground. She covered her mouth and then her eyes with her hands. *Let the horror end, she prayed. Lady Gunnora, let it end. Let me go now so that I may lead the dead back to the fields, and the living may go on with their lives.*

The silence continued.

At last, she looked up. Near the shoreline, villagers were moving among Keron's fallen men, slitting the throats of those few who still lived. Already the beached boats were afire and swimmers were approaching the ships at anchor. It was clear that no resistance would be met there. Smoke from the burning boats was drifting upland to join that from the smoldering sugarcane fields.

Tammon moaned and Sionna crawled stiffly to her side.

"Is he dead?" the priestess asked.

"Aye, Aunt," Sionna whispered.

Tammon sighed and sagged under Sionna's hands. Her thin lips were turning blue and her age-spotted skin lay flaccid along her high cheekbones. Blood soaked her shoulder.

"I am going now to lead the ancestors back to the fields," Tammon said.

"But it was I who freed them," Sionna cried. "I unsealed the ground and called them forth."

"No," Tammon said. "You only called them forth. I unsealed the ground when I saw to the digging of your daughter's grave. If you had not been so torn by grief you would have seen that I never laid a proper mourning spell to seal the site."

Sionna remembered suddenly the stunted, dry grass that had appeared over her daughter's burial mound. And later the strange pale smoke that had lifted from there. Her aunt had known this thing must be done, and her child had lain waiting all that time.

"You must bear another child," Tammon whispered. "Many children so that the Old Ones can live on in those of Lelanin blood." She relaxed further, her eyelids closed. "You are Lelanin."

Sionna lifted a trembling hand to offer thanks, but the

priestess was already dead. The lady of the valley moved gently instead to close her aunt's shrunken blue lips.

Sionna placed a hand over her own mouth then and waited in silence until others came to care for Tammon. Then she walked alone into the sugarcane fields. Sheltered by smoldering, whispering cane, she buried her grief in a deep hole, and sealed the wound with a carpet of perfect green.