

Songs of the Endless Night

by Christy Devonport

A Serena Story

Featured on The Renegade Timelord Website

<http://drwho.rartec.com/>

Abstract: A castaway hears a strange, unfamiliar cry in the dark. Could it be a monster, coming to hunt her at last?

An odd, keening moan drifted through the darkness. The call repeated three times, like the howl of an injured animal.

Suthuth stopped gathering mushrooms and raised her head, flicking her tongue out to sense the vibrations in the air.

A solid thump concluded the strange cry, and the natural sounds of the endless night resumed. In the distance, the humming, clicking song of the wailers increased in frequency for a few minutes, perhaps in response to the inexplicable sound. Other ordinary noises continued unabated: the sonar cries of the bats, searching for food; the occasional squeaks of the pond mice, scavenging in the mud; the gentle rustling of night scooters, foraging in the fungal shrubs.

The unidentifiable sound had originated somewhere off to the left. Suthuth shivered, in spite of the warm air, wondering what had made the noise. She had thought that she was finally over her fear of the dark, having developed a sense of comfort through familiarity with her surroundings, but the eerie cry stirred up fresh terror. In the year since she had been stranded on the unnamed world, she had never heard anything like it.

She slowly stood up, straining for other noises that didn't belong, but she heard nothing else unusual.

What had made the strange sound?

Was it a rescue craft, coming to save her and her mistress long after they had given up hope? No, she reasoned, that seemed too unlikely, and if it had been a landing craft she would have heard the stabilisers and engines.

Was it a newly crashed vessel? It could have been, but wouldn't there have been atmospheric explosions or sonic booms?

She trembled slightly.

Maybe it was a living creature, something wounded and dying. She had never explored beyond their valley, so there could easily be other animals that she had never encountered. Maybe something had wandered into their area.

Maybe it was a monster, the one Kinmay always feared, finally coming to stalk them.

Her heart pounded faster, and she decided it was time to go back and check on her mistress.

Coughing emanated from their escape pod-turned-shelter as Suthuth approached. Kinmay must have heard her climbing up the metal steps because she called out.

"Chopkey dear?" She often addressed her by her title, Chopkey, which identified her servant rank. Even light years from home, stuck on a strange world without other elements of their civilization, Kinmay clung to her traditions.

Suthuth didn't mind; she was accustomed to her mistress' habits.

"I'm here," she replied.

"Did you hear those wretched wailers? They were making such a racket earlier." Her weakened voice wavered slightly, and her lungs rasped with every breath.

"Yes, Mistress." She bustled around the room, putting her mushrooms in a container and cleaning her hands. Everything in the cabin had its place, and she moved as comfortably as if she could see.

"Water."

Suthuth thought nothing of the order as she helped her mistress sit up and held a cup of water to her parched lips. Kinmay drank only a few sips before pushing her servant's arm away.

"What made them chatter so?" she asked. "Are the rains coming again?"

“I don’t think so,” replied Suthuth. “Something odd happened.” She described the eerie cry and resounding thud that had echoed across the landscape.

“Maybe the monsters are coming to eat us at last,” said Kinmay. She’d carried this fear with her ever since they’d crashed on the dark world. Her tone, once laced with terror, now seemed apathetic, almost as if she wanted the end to come.

“Nonsense.” Suthuth set the cup aside and adjusted Kinmay’s bedclothes. “I’d better go check it out,” she added, sounding braver than she felt. She decided she didn’t want to wait for the end to come in the musty escape pod.

“The monsters will probably find me while you’re out.” Kinmay spoke harshly, trying to provoke a feeling of guilt.

Suthuth knew she didn’t like to be left alone for long periods of time. It probably discomfited her to be alone with her thoughts.

“Though I won’t make much of a meal for them,” Kinmay added as an afterthought.

“I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

As she walked through the darkness, walking stick tapping ahead of her to warn her of dangerous terrain, she thought about her mistress.

Lady Kinmay had been a widow for a long time. Her husband had died in an accident years earlier during a outpost visit, leaving her to take care of the estate and their three children. They were all grown now, and she’d seen her two daughters married off into rich families on other colonial worlds.

Her son, Leexor, had given her the most trouble, and Suthuth supposed Kinmay spent a lot of time thinking about him. On more than one occasion, Kinmay had wondered aloud whether Leexor was managing the estate affairs properly, whether he had married well or badly, whether he had spent any time searching for his mother after he’d received news of the hyperspace ambush and his mother’s disappearance.

Her stick splashed water, and she nimbly skirted one of the spring-fed ponds that dotted the blind man’s landscape. Getting around on the dark world had been a challenge at first, but it didn’t bother her that much now. Being enclosed in permanent night had sharpened her non-visual senses, and she had nearly memorised the local terrain.

She wasn’t blind—she had perfectly good eyes as far as she knew—but an impenetrable mist shrouded the planet. She wasn’t even sure if it orbited a sun—she’d never seen the sun rise, although they did at least appear to have seasons, judging by the

torrential rains that had lasted nearly a month. She gazed up blindly at the dark sky, wishing she could at least see the stars, but the thick atmosphere hid them from her.

When they'd first arrived, she had tried using the emergency torches from their craft to explore. However, the dense vapour dampened and scattered all light. Worse than the thickest fog she'd ever seen, it never dispersed. Eventually Suthuth had realised that her sight was a useless sense here, and she adapted.

Her mistress had not adjusted as well. Due to her inability to cope without sight plus her poor health, she spent most of her time holed up in the remains of their damaged vessel. She had sustained wounds during their escape, and while Suthuth had done her best to heal them using the medical kit, Kinmay's condition continued to deteriorate as her body wasted away from the damage. The toxins from her incurable infections were slowly building up and destroying her from the inside.

They had been traveling to a ceremony on Esok Beta, where Lady Kinmay planned to represent Karthell Prime during the formal signing of a trade treaty. When they were attacked on route in hyperspace—they never knew by whom—most of the travel party died. Suthuth had managed to secure an escape pod and bundled her wounded mistress aboard, and they had survived, drifting in hyperspace for over a month. Their distress beacon failed before anyone found them. At last, a planet's gravity well tugged them out of hyperspace, and they crashed on the dark world. No one ever came for them; both had given up hope of ever being rescued.

Suthuth paused, listening carefully. The walk had calmed her nerves slightly, and she had suffered no attack. She flicked her sensitive tongue a few times to taste the humid air.

A faint vibration disturbed the night. Almost undetectable, the sound emanated from something just ahead.

What could be making it? It almost sounded like the pulse of an... engine. But that was impossible!

She shook her head and probed the ground, slowly approaching the source of the noise.

Her stick touched something solid.

She tapped it a few times, and the metal stick made a solid clink, like the sound of metal on rock.

She cautiously reached out and slowly felt around with her free hand, moving forward very carefully. Her fingers contacted something solid.

The mysterious object felt like polished marble, smooth and cold.

Slinging her walking stick over her shoulder by its strap, she proceeded to study the surface more thoroughly. Her palms slid over the stone, searching for minute features that would explain what it was.

She was certain the object did not belong as a natural feature in the landscape. As her fingers discovered an edge, she followed the corner—a well-defined 90° angle. She moved more quickly now, following it all the way around until she had returned to her starting point. The object was clearly rectangular, a little smaller than their escape pod but nonetheless quite large. She knelt, letting her claws trace the base where she felt a junction with the soil. The object rested heavily on the earth.

She rose, letting her finger tips crawl up the face. Even on her toes, she couldn't feel the top edge. She used her walking stick to tap higher, and at the very top of her range, it met open air.

Stepping back, she pictured its shape in her mind's eye: a monument, perhaps?

But why did it hum?

If it was a monument, perhaps she would find an inscription etched into the surface.

The first side carried neither markings nor indentations, and the second, narrower side was equally plain. However, when her fingers examined the third side, she found something interesting.

The feature, sitting about chest height, felt colder than the stony quality of the rest of the structure. She rubbed her fingers against it, and they skidded and jumped along the material. She reached down and compared it to the finish of her pounded metal buckle, realising it felt the same.

She studied the metallic adornment for a full ten minutes, tracing the lines and curves with her fingers, trying to discover the nature of the symbol. She could feel tiny grooves in the metal. It didn't seem to have the shape of writing; it was more like the figure of a bird.

Beyond that, she could discover no more. She briefly wished for her sight.

Next, she tried pounding the structure. "Hello!" she cried experimentally. Her efforts were as effective as hitting solid rock, and no response came.

She put her ear against the stone. The distinctive hum still reminded her of engine vibration, but it made no sense.

Just as she exhausted her investigation, she heard a swishing sound approach.

"Stk-Stk." The trilling notes of a wailer announced the new arrival.

“Yes, it’s me. Suthuth,” she replied, understanding the wailer’s representation of her name. Most of their language was beyond her comprehension, since it more closely resembled music than speech, but in the last year she had learned to recognise their way of addressing each other.

“Trll-Trll-tkktk,” intoned the wailer, providing his own identifier as common courtesy seemed to require.

She greeted him in return, mimicking his name as best she could. Most of the wailers tended to avoid the two castaways, but Trll-Trll had always shown more curiosity than most. Suthuth had managed to strike up an odd sort of friendship with him, though their “conversations” were limited. She wasn’t even sure if he was male or female; she had merely assumed he was male as a convenience.

Her mistress had been the one to actually name them wailers. When they’d first arrived, the two of them had envisioned frightful sources for the peculiar wailing and chattering that punctuated the night.

The air shifted slightly above her head, and she sensed Trll-Trll’s slender tentacle examining the monument, exploring it much as she had.

“Any ideas?” She realised he was equally unfamiliar the object.

He trilled, chirped, and whistled in quite an extended burst of song.

“Hmm. You’re stumped too, huh?” Of course, she had no idea what he was trying to tell her, but sometimes pretending to understand cheered her up.

One of his thin secondary arms reached out and gently brushed her cheek, as if acknowledging her comment. The tiny sensory feelers on the tentacle tickled, reminding her of the whiskers of a kalpmek, a furry, domesticated animal on her home world.

“I wonder where it came from,” she said.

As she approached the escape pod, Suthuth thought she heard an unfamiliar voice. She dismissed the notion and climbed the metal steps, pushing the door aside.

“You’re not going to believe what I found today, Mistress.”

Kinmay’s voice returned to her across the dark. “I believe I can do one better, Chopkey.” She paused for effect. “We have a visitor.”

This stopped Suthuth in her tracks. “What?”

“Yes,” explained Kinmay. “Our visitor arrived just a few minutes ago.” She addressed the stranger. “This is my servant, Suthuth. Chopkey—our new friend, Lady Selena.”

“Serena,” corrected the visitor. Her clear voice contrasted sharply with the pompous tones of the old woman. A note of tension coloured her words; she was obviously uncomfortable with Kinmay’s assumptions of aristocracy. “The title is accurate, I suppose, but I’d much prefer it if you’d just call me *Serena*.” She placed emphasis on her name, trying to reinforce the sound of it so they would not forget. To Suthuth, it almost suggested some kind of underlying meaning, as if her name meant more than just a few syllables of identification.

“Ah, I thought so,” said Kinmay smugly, obviously pleased with her guess of Serena’s title. “You have the right bearing for a noble. I can hear it in your voice. Now then, before my Chopkey interrupted us, you were telling me you’d lost something, weren’t you?”

Serena bristled. “My companion, Amy.” She paused, apparently trying to control her frustration with Kinmay. “She disappeared in the... fog.”

The way she spoke, Kinmay wondered if the visitor was hiding something or leaving out an important piece of information. It wouldn’t surprise her; Kinmay’s attitude was enough to discourage anyone from sharing a lot of details.

“Oh, the dreary fog,” said Kinmay. “Not a day goes by when I don’t wish for a sunrise.” She sighed loudly. “Just one more sunrise, before I die.”

“The atmosphere is surprisingly dense,” said Serena. “Especially considering it’s still breathable.”

An audible click came from her direction, and Suthuth thought she could just make out a very faint glimmering of light.

“Oh, yes.” Kinmay coughed. “Portable lights are quite useless here. I used to have a torch around here, somewhere.” She fumbled with the contents on her nightstand, knocking objects about noisily. “I used to hold the lamp to my face and stare at the beam, just to know that my eyes still worked. Alas, the battery eventually died.”

An awkward silence fell over the trio, until Suthuth said, “It hasn’t been that bad though. Before our food supplies ran out, I discovered there were edible mushrooms and things growing nearby. And there’s plenty of fresh water.”

“Don’t be rude, Chopkey. I did not give you leave to speak.” Kinmay spoke harshly, reminding Suthuth of her place. It was her way of showing off for the guest.

“That was uncalled for,” said Serena, surprised and shocked. “Is this how you always treat your only companion?”

Suthuth couldn’t be sure, but she almost thought Serena sounded guilty.

“She is my servant; I am her mistress.” Kinmay acted as if that explained everything perfectly.

The air stirred, and Suthuth sensed that Serena had suddenly moved very close to her mistress.

“You ought to rethink your behavior,” hissed Serena, voice low and full of unexpected menace. She must have been mere inches from Kinmay’s face.

Kinmay let out a frightened squeak.

Hoping to avert an accident, Suthuth stepped forward, grasping Serena’s arm in the dark. A soft velvet sleeve met her fingers. “Please, don’t be upset on my account,” she pleaded. “It’s okay. Really.”

Serena shrugged her off and backed away.

Distressed by the harsh warning, Kinmay gasped, and her asthmatic wheezing turned into a series of uncontrolled coughs. Suthuth hurried to get her a cup of water, while Serena stood by without saying a word.

“You’d better leave,” suggested Suthuth, worried about her mistress. Even after the bedridden woman stopped coughing, her breaths remained unsteady and her pulse, erratic. “Lady Kinmay needs to rest.”

“Hmm.”

“Maybe your missing friend returned to your ship,” said Suthuth, remembering Serena’s reason for coming.

“I suppose she could have gone back,” said Serena.

“She might be searching for you, just as you are looking for her.”

Serena agreed, a glimmer of hope brightening her tone, and excused herself quietly, letting Suthuth tend to her mistress.

It only occurred to Suthuth after she’d gone that their only chance of escaping the planet had just walked off into the darkness, possibly never to return.

She was still annoyed with herself a few hours later when she went to a nearby stream to collect some fresh water. As she poured the old contents out of her jug, a voice startled her.

“Hello?” called Serena.

The stranger had returned, after all.

“You came back.” Filling her jug, Suthuth rose. “Did you find your friend?”



“No,” replied Serena. She sounded disappointed and disheartened. “I was wondering—would you mind terribly helping me look for her? I brought a life sign detector to guide us, but I could use some company. I’m really worried.”

Suthuth decided to forgive the stranger for upsetting Kinmay earlier. If she’d been in the same situation, worrying about a missing friend, she would probably have felt anxious and oversensitive, too. “I guess it’s okay. Let me tell Kinmay before we go.”

Serena followed her back to the crashed pod.

“Still alone?” muttered Kinmay, feeling less friendly towards the stranger.

Suthuth didn’t give Serena an opportunity to reply. “I’m going to help Serena look. I’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

“Oh, I don’t know why you bother,” said Kinmay lightly. “Your friend was probably eaten by one of those dreadful wailers.”

“What?!” cried Serena. Her sudden horror filled the space like something tangible.

“That’s not true!” exclaimed Suthuth.

“Don’t contradict me, Chopkey. It’s unseemly.”

“But you know the wailers wouldn’t harm a fly!”

Kinmay let out a hollow laugh.

“What are these wailers?” asked Serena, trying to maintain her control.

“Large, *harmless* creatures that live out there,” explained Suthuth.

Serena sighed in relief.

“Harmless, pah! If you don’t include that awful racket they make day and night.” Sighing dramatically, Kinmay showed her disgust for the creatures.

“That must be what we heard when we left the TARDIS,” murmured Serena.

“Well, Suthuth can help you look. I suppose I can do without her services for a few hours.”

“How kind of you,” Serena replied, her tone chilly enough to freeze water.

“It’s the least I can do, for a fellow noble.” Kinmay somehow managed to sound gracious and condescending at the same time.

“Are you comfortable following my voice?” asked Suthuth.

“Perfectly. I have excellent hearing.” Away from Kinmay’s antagonism, Serena seemed calmer. She spoke with more confidence, her morale obviously boosted now that they were actively looking for her missing friend.

Suthuth tapped her walking stick ahead of them, occasionally skirting the large fungal shrubs that dotted the landscape and provided tripping hazards. Though Serena remained quiet, apparently satisfied with the lack of conversation, the prolonged silence got on Suthuth's nerves.

"How did you get here?" she finally asked. "Did you crash?"

"No. Our arrival was intentional."

Fearing the strange woman would evade further explanation, Suthuth wondered if she should pry.

However, Serena seemed troubled and soon continued. "We were looking for a special mineral."

"Like gold?"

"No, nothing like that. Ketrocalticyte—an unusual sort of crystal. I don't think it's considered particularly valuable," she added.

Suthuth heard fabric rustling and guessed Serena was searching her pockets for something. An electronic beep sounded—no doubt the sensor she had mentioned.

"This planet was supposed to be rich in it." She paused, listening to the steady beeping from her device.

"And it isn't?"

"It is," she said, disappointment evident in her voice. "But there's something odd about the local compound. When we arrived, we tried an experiment."

She explained how Amy was a telepath—the unfamiliar concept of direct mental communication amazed Suthuth—but that she had difficulty focusing her abilities and shielding herself from random interference. The crystal could be used to help her tune her ability and prevent the migraines she kept getting. The abundant presence of the crystal should have made it easier for the two of them to talk telepathically, but the experiment failed miserably.

"Contrary to our expectations, the mineral appears to dampen out the telepathic signals. That's how we got separated." The beeping steadily increased. "Normally I can sense Amy's presence because of her telepathic nature, but right now I'm not picking up anything more than a faint, diffused signal."

"Why didn't the crystal work if there's so much of it here?"

"It turned out to be an enantiomorph," explained Serena.

"A what?"

“Sorry,” she said. “Ketrocalticyte comes in two molecular configurations which are mirror images of each other. Each version has slightly different properties. One helps focus the telepathic signals, and the other—”

“Blocks them?”

“Exactly. The local Ketrocalticyte is the one with the diffusion properties. I didn’t realise it when we arrived, but I confirmed it when I went back to my ship a little while ago.”

“It still sounds like it could be useful,” said Suthuth. “You said Amy gets headaches? Couldn’t you at least use the crystal to prevent her migraines?”

“A good suggestion,” said Serena, obviously having already considered it. “It only works so well here because of its abundance in the soil. Away from this planet, Amy would have to carry several pounds to have even a modest effect. The other version would be preferable. I could have fashioned a small, wearable device for her.”

“Oh. Is there anywhere else—”

A shrill scream pierced the darkness.

“Amy!” cried Serena.

Another shriek followed the first.

Suthuth’s heart raced. She sensed a disturbance in the air next to her. “Serena?”

Silence met her question, and she realised the strange woman had gone after her friend.

“She must be crazy!” How could she expect to move quickly in the darkness without tripping on something? Suthuth listened carefully and started to follow, perplexed by Amy’s scream. What had frightened Serena’s friend so badly?

As she tapped her way across the landscape, hoping she was going in the right direction, she suddenly noticed a deathly stillness had settled over the area. It reminded her of the unnatural quiet the time the big earthquake had shaken her home village, when the birds stopped singing just beforehand. Here, an underlying current of noise ordinarily filled the endless night—from the wailers to the bats, nearly everything that lived on the planet used sound to communicate or search for food. She couldn’t remember a time when it had been so quiet.

Thoroughly spooked, she crept forward.

She was just beginning to think she had lost Serena when a dreadful, inhuman screech sent a shiver down her spine.

Maybe Kinmay was right—maybe there really was a monster.

She knew the last year of relative tranquility was too good to be true. Maybe something else lived here and had finally discovered them—a creature bigger than the wailers that ate more than just pond mice and mushrooms.

“Serena?” she called, too frightened to keep quiet. “Seren—”

A cool hand clapped over her mouth, stifling her call. She struggled for a moment, but her captor gripped her with the strength of steel.

“Shhh!” hissed a voice in her ear. “There’s something here with us, and it has Amy,” Serena whispered. She slowly guided Suthuth over to the left, where it was presumably safer.

“What made that awful sound?” she asked quietly.

“The thing that trapped my friend. I tried to rescue her.”

The tone in Serena’s voice made the leathery skin on the back of Suthuth’s neck crawl. Though not directed at her, the determination—and menace—in the stranger’s words frightened her. She wondered what exactly Serena had done in her attempted rescue.

Something thrashed against the ground nearby.

“Stay here,” ordered Serena.

Suthuth was amazed at how silently Serena moved—more like a spirit than an ordinary woman. She couldn’t even hear her padding away in the soft soil.

An airy swish ended in a dull thump. Suthuth flicked out her tongue, trying to sense the subtle shifts in the air. She thought she heard a little gasp from Serena as something thudded into the ground—hard.

The same, eerie shriek tore through the air again as Serena apparently scored a minor victory.

“Where am I?” cried a weak, unfamiliar voice.

“Amy—” replied Serena breathlessly. “Hold on!” She moved quickly, almost as if she had jumped straight over the unseen adversary.

‘It’s got me! It’s got me by the neck!’ called Amy, her voice shaking with panic.

The earth rumbled to Suthuth’s right.

“Another one?” said Serena, full of disbelief.

“Help! I can’t... I can’t breath!” cried Amy.

“There’s more than one?” murmured Suthuth.

Something bristly scraped against her cheek. She reached up instinctively to brush the irritant away, and a familiar tentacle twisted around her wrist. She jumped in surprise.

A huge sigh of relief escaped her lungs. “Thank the gods! Trll-Trll!”

Her wailer friend had come to help.

“It’s me, Suthuth.” She racked her brains, wishing more than ever that she understood how to communicate with him. “Help us,” she said simply, hoping for the best.

“Just a minute,” cried Serena, apparently thinking Suthuth was calling for help from her. The air shifted.

“Stk-Stk—” chirped the friendly wailer, sounding distressed. An unexpected shriek ripped through the air, coursing through his tentacle arms.

Alarmed, she asked, “What is it?” He tightened his grip on Suthuth’s wrist. “You’re hurting me!” In that instant, everything fell into place. “Oh no!” she gasped. Her friend had made the same deafening cry as their mysterious adversary. That could only mean one thing: the supposed monster was another wailer.

“Serena... Stop!” she cried.

“What?!” Anger and disbelief filled Serena’s voice.

“Please! You’ve made a terrible mistake.”

“Serena!” cried Amy.

Suthuth began to imitate identifiers for her friend, hoping to calm the situation. “Trll-Trll-tktk. Stk-Stk. Trll-Trll-tktk.”

Her friend let out a painful clicking sound, followed by his own identifier. Then he chirped, “Stk-Stk.”

“Yes, it’s me.” She spoke calmly and then reached up with her free hand to gently caress his tentacle. The tiny sensory feelers along the arm twitched nervously.

By now, the fight had ceased. Everyone seemed to be listening to Suthuth’s soft voice and the pained warbling from her friend.

A second tentacle reached up and touched Suthuth’s forehead. Trll-Trll then pronounced a more complex series of whistles and clicks.

In response, several chirps issued from the other wailer.

“I’m... I’m free!” Amy sounded surprised and relieved.

“You’re okay?” called Serena.

“Yes... I think so.”

Suthuth ignored them for the moment and focused on soothing her friend. He shifted his massive bulk behind her, and some of his larger support tentacles scraped against the ground. It was almost comforting, now that she knew what it was. Trll-Trll reached forward and placed one of his tentacles in Suthuth’s hands. She discovered a gooey section and guessed it was slashed.

The second wailer, satisfied by the song from Trll-Trll, slowly rumbled away.

Serena helped her friend up, and then they followed the sound of Suthuth's voice to join her.

"Are you okay?" asked Serena, the sharpness gone from her voice.

"I'm fine," snapped Suthuth. "But you hurt my friend." The wailer allowed her to probe the injury, though he jerked from her touch a few times. Some of the sensory feelers were crushed, and the ragged gash oozed a sticky fluid. She fumbled in her pouch and withdrew a small piece of cloth, which she used to mop the wound. "You've done quite a number on him."

"I'm sorry," apologised Serena. "I didn't know."

"Hmm."

"The other one grabbed me," said Amy, perplexed and apologetic. "All I could feel was this weird, prickly sensation when something wrapped around my arm." She sighed shakily, no doubt still feeling the after-effects of her adrenalin rush. "I didn't know what it was."

"The wailer wouldn't have hurt you. He was probably just curious." She detected the scent of fungal shrubs in the air. "This is one of their feeding grounds—they like to eat the mushrooms around here."

After Trll-Trll wandered away, apparently recovered, Suthuth insisted upon returning to the escape pod to get the two women cleaned up, even though they both claimed they were fine.

"Do you understand their language," asked Amy as they approached the shelter.

"Not really—just greetings," replied Suthuth.

"Well, thank goodness for that!" She paused, directing her next question to Serena who walked at her side. "How come you couldn't tell what they were saying?" She sounded puzzled, as if she expected Serena to understand every alien they encountered.

"They don't use regular speech," said Serena. "It's definitely a form of communication, but it doesn't follow the structure of complex language. It's more like... whale song." She spoke with a fascinated tone, contrasting with her earlier moodiness. "Given time and study I'm sure I could make more sense of it." Her confidence sounded ten times stronger now that she had recovered her companion.

Suthuth climbed the steps, realizing she had left Kinmay alone for quite a while. “Hello!” she called. “I’m sorry I took so long. We ran into some trouble.” She hung up her walking stick on its hook. “But we managed to find Serena’s friend.”

No response came.

“Mistress?”

She listened for Kinmay’s laboured breathing; perhaps she was asleep.

Silence filled the escape pod.

“Ugh! It smells like dead carnations in here,” said Amy, coming up behind her.

The scent smelled ordinary to Suthuth—Kinmay’s diseased body had given off a sweet, rotting odor for months, but she was used to it. However, the peculiar hush worried her.

She leaned over and felt for Kinmay’s shape, half expecting to find the bed empty. “Mistress?” Her fingers touched cold flesh, the loose skin of a boney arm. Her throat tightened as she carefully slid her fingers up to Kinmay’s neck to look for a pulse.

“Oh no,” she murmured.

“What’s the matter?” asked Amy.

“She’s dead.” She collapsed into the chair next to the bed.

Serena stepped forward, checking the pulse for herself. “The body is quite cold... and stiff with rigor mortis. She must have passed away soon after we left her earlier.”

Suthuth ignored this. “It’s my fault. I should have looked after her better.”

“Who was she?” whispered Amy to her friend. Serena provided a brief explanation.

“What am I going to do now?” Not really expecting an answer, Suthuth felt a mixture of guilt and loss. She felt like crawling into a hole. Kinmay hadn’t been the best mistress, but she’d served her faithfully—it was her duty.

“Well, you’re free now,” said Serena. “You don’t need to be a slave anymore. Don’t forget, she wasn’t very nice to you.”

“So what?” She exclaimed. Her face felt flushed. “That doesn’t matter. She was my mistress. It’s my fault she died alone.”

Suthuth and Kinmay were going home at last—though Kinmay would never get to see the last sunrise she had wanted. Serena and Amy had offered to provide transport, trying to make up for their mistake with the wailers.

Serena walked somewhere ahead of them, pushing the coffin-encased body on an antigrav sled, while Amy held back to comfort the depressed servant. Suthuth was too distracted to take much notice of where they were heading, so Amy's homing device guided them with continuous beeps.

"What do you think you'll do, after the funeral?"

"I don't know," answered Suthuth, facing her uncertain future. "Probably see if one of Kinmay's daughters needs staff."

"You don't need to, you know. There are lots of places you could go." Amy couldn't understand why she'd willingly remain a servant for her whole life. "You could do something else—like study medicine. Serena mentioned how you'd cared for your mistress since you crashed here. You must have some natural talent to keep her going for so long."

Trying a different occupation had never before occurred to her. Her people were trained for servitude from childhood. "No. It's better this way." She dismissed the suggestion out of hand; it made her feel awkward. She decided to change the subject. "What about you? I guess you didn't get what you came here for, did you?"

"Not really." Amy sighed. "Oh well. Serena is a genius—I'm sure she'll come up with something else."

When the homing device emitted a near buzz, they slowed their pace. "I think we've arrived," said Amy.

Suthuth reached out to feel for the ship's hull, still wondering how the strangers had arrived without noticeable engine noise.

"Now, where is my key?" Amy patted herself down. "Ah ha!"

A familiar surface greeted Suthuth's hand. "The monument?" She was confused.

"Huh?" A click answered Amy's turn of the key. "Oh, you must mean the TARDIS." A soft whirring followed as a door apparently opened.

A thudding sound came up behind them. "Stk-Stk."

Suthuth recognised the chirp of her friend. "Can you give me a minute?"

"Sure. Just feel your way inside when you're ready."

The wailer whistled a few times and reached out.

"I guess this is goodbye," said the desolate woman. She gently stroked his tentacle, letting the tiny sensory feelers slide underneath her fingers. "I'll miss you."

He responded with a complicated series of chirps and clicks. A scuffing sound announced that he was probing the door.

"You take care." She couldn't think of anything else to say.



Trll-Trll nudged her slightly and then moved away.

She sighed and felt her way into the ship.

Dry air met her, contrasting sharply with the external humidity with which she had grown accustomed.

An instant later, the seemingly dazzling light of the interior shocked Suthuth's eyes, oversensitive from disuse. She instinctively reached up to protect them, feeling as if she had just faced the full glare of the sun.

"Are you okay?" asked Amy, concerned.

"I... I think so." She carefully pulled her fingers away and blinked repeatedly, trying to focus. "It's been nearly a year since I've used my eyes. I guess they're still working."

As her eyes adjusted, she found herself staring at a massive room. It wasn't nearly as bright as it had seemed upon entry. Wall-mounted gaslights cast a warm glow on everything, making it seem cozy and peaceful, like one of the shrines on her home world. Dark, granite walls encircled the room, interrupted by beautiful stained glass windows.

Her eyes gravitated toward the focal point of the room, a hexagonal console supporting a plasma-filled cylinder. A petite woman—Serena, no doubt—stood before the controls, her back to her. Shining blond hair cascaded over her dark velvet jacket, and Suthuth briefly wondered how she could have found her so intimidating a few hours earlier.

"Welcome to the TARDIS," said Amy, walking over to a set of armchairs.

"This is a... ship?" Suthuth's sensitive tongue picked up the resonance of the engines, buried somewhere beneath the floor.

Amy nodded. "Ready to take you anywhere you like."

Suthuth spotted the antigrav carrier, supporting the casket. She slowly wandered over, resting her hand on the simple black case. She felt as if something was missing—it seemed strange that she would never again hear Kinmay's nagging voice.

"I'm sorry, Mistress," she murmured.

As Serena activated the controls, a whining cry filled the air—the same keening noise Suthuth had heard only the day before. She realised it had something to do with the ship's engines, but it sounded very mournful to her, like a funereal cry.

"At least we're finally going home," she added softly. Her words sounded hollow to her, and she wondered if she would really fit in when she returned.

She suddenly longed for the song of the wailers.