

S'OLCARIAS'S SONS

by

Lisa Swallow

The old Sulcarman yanked the needle through the canvas, tying off the last stitch. His scarred, thick-jointed hands cramped and now refused to unbend. He dropped the needle atop spools of coarse thread, then pushed the heavy sail off his lap onto the cabin floor. Outside, the moon, the stars, even a light on the distant shore, rose and fell with the motion of the sea.

"They're calling me," he muttered to no one in particular.

Little Ortins stopped coiling the thick rope to listen very hard. "Who's calling you, Grandpa? All I hear is the waves on the hull."

"Ahh! You hear it too." The Sulcarman reached his hands out to the black metal stove, also bolted against the unceasing action of wind and waves.

He looked up, his eyes misty, his lips firm. His glance took in the whole of the thick-timbered cabin: the bundles of special cargo too precious for the damp hold, the weathered charts on the wall, his own well-worn sea boots by the door. He yearned for more work, but with two women close to delivery and one man lamed from a fall, there was not even enough "sit-down work" to go around. Whenever one of the children passed within arm's reach his

hand shot out to tousle curly blond hair or brush a soft pink cheek.

One by one his family finished their chores, stomped through the door, and shook sea spray from their hair and coats. Last came his son, now a fine captain himself. Before closing the door behind him he nodded to some sailor out of sight to the old man. Those with no kin-ties aboard, no family with which to spend the dark night, would tend the ship, keep her on course until the morning gave the sea a reddish glow.

"Please, Grandpa, can I sit on your lap tonight?" Loqutha asked.

His son answered for him before he could speak. "Not tonight. Grandpa's tired."

"But I'll take a big serpent hug," the gnarled old man said as he pulled her in close. He held her tight for a long time, savoring her fresh child-scent, feeling the smoothness of her skin and hair.

The whole family took up their places, cross-legged at his feet. He looked from one much-loved face to another before he finally began.

"Tonight I want to tell you a very special story. It's a story my grandfather told me when I was just about your age"—he winked at Ortins—"and a story you'll tell your grandchildren when you get to be mine. This story is about brave, beautiful Anatella . . ."

He paused for a moment, waiting for Loqutha to stop pulling her brother's hair, then waved his finger in the air and warned, "This story is very important to the Sulcar people, so do not miss a word.

"Imagine," he began, "back to a time when men were too tall to board our ships without bumping their heads on the rigging and so strong that one man could hoist the mainsail on his own." The old man paused for effect. "Now picture a beautiful girl named Anatella who lived with her father on a huge mountain near to the seacoast of Karsten."

"I don't wanna hear about any old landliver!" Ortins protested.

"I felt the same when I first heard this story," the old man said, smiling slightly. "But Anatella was not just any landliver. Nor did she live out her entire life apart from the sea. You see," he paused again to make sure everyone was listening, "Anatella was the mother of us all."

"Humph!"

"Have you never wondered why we live upon the seas and all other men live on hard dry ground? Why they fear the water that for us is life? Why our true beliefs do not mesh with theirs?"

Ortins nodded.

"Well, then listen. And open your heart and mind as well as your ears."

Hundreds of miles away from the nearest mountain the captain's fire crackled. The old man's voice lulled his family.

"Anatella spent her seventeenth winter alone, except for her father, cut off from the rest of the world by oceans of snow. Many of her kind would have pined away from loneliness, but Anatella was mountain-bred. Like the Sulcar, she had learned to love herself and to relish every moment of her life, whether it be spent in company or alone.

"In the spring the roads firmed after an early thaw. Anatella and her father saddled their mounts for the long trek down to the nearest village. The weather was crisp and clear. Silanti flowers bloomed profusely at every turn. It was a beautiful, uneventful journey until a handful of moments changed the course of Anatella's life, and of ours . . ."

When they rode into the first clearing two knives greeted them. One ruffled Anatella's hair as it passed, the other hit her father in the thigh and he doubled over with pain.

Whoops and hollers shattered the peace of the glade. Outlaws dragged the mountainman from his saddle; two

more came at Anatella. She knocked the first man down with one well-aimed kick. Almost in a single motion she unsheathed her hunting knife and cut a red stripe across the second man's forearm, causing his knife to clatter to the ground.

Anatella raced to her father's side. Though sorely outnumbered his skillful slashing kept the outlaws at bay for the time being. In a glance she saw he had pulled the knife out of his leg, saw the blood pulse from his open wound and pool on the ground.

"Anatella, no!" he yelled. "Run while you can."

She hesitated, torn between obedience and her fear for her father's life. "Look out!" he shouted. Two attackers came at her from the rear. Her frightened horse lunged forward, out of control.

By the time she had calmed the mount she was at the far side of the clearing. As one in a trance she watched the highwaymen heading toward her. She stared numbly at her father's body where it lay on the muddy ground.

"Don't kill her. She's mine!" The outlaw she had wounded led the group, astride her father's mare. She swung her gelding around and headed up the mountain.

Hours later, she found herself trapped on the only path up the steep mountain. She tried to leave the trail, but each time the harsh terrain slowed her progress and recorded her passage in mud and broken branches. Her pursuers had an easy time tracking her. Still, she continued toward her cabin, the only refuge she knew.

Instead of a camp that night Anatella settled against the trunk of a tree and heaped dry leaves over her body for warmth. Each creaking tree branch, each rummaging opossum, startled her and rekindled her fear of the men that followed. When she closed her eyes she saw her father's body, a dirt-colored mound left in the clearing to rot or to feed the winter-hungry scavengers. Tears would not come, nor the death prayers she knew she should say, for a part of her could not accept that he was gone.

At the first hint of light in the eastern sky she resaddled

the horse. It quickened its pace as it neared the cabin and Anatella felt her own excitement grow as she too picked out landmarks she had known all her life.

Inside the cabin she had left only the day before, the emptiness seemed to cry out to her. Tears welled up in her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. Instead she set herself to hunting a new kind of game. She pulled down the metal traps that her father saved for the most vicious beasts. With each set of sharp teeth she pried open, she reminded herself nothing could be more vicious than the men that followed.

Anatella turned her back on her home and continued her trek. Just as she reached the mountain's summit she heard a piercing scream. She'd heard that same kind of cry from a trapped mountain wolf. The others would be more careful from now on, she thought, but maybe they would not expect traps in the kitchen or under the bed. A second higher-pitched scream filtered through the trees and Anatella smiled grimly before heading down the seldom-traveled far side of her mountain.

The deer trail she followed ended at a fast-flowing river, too swift to ford. She loosened her horse's reins and set about finding some kind of protection. She had just finished tying off the first trap when the outlaws crashed through the brush.

"There she is!" the leader shouted, pointing with his left arm, for his right was cradled in a ragged sling. Anatella backed away from them, into the brush and undergrowth, until she could move no farther. She held her breath as the first one approached. Closer, closer, until she could smell his filth, and then she cut the string and two branches of dagger thorns shredded his face and chest. The second man stepped over the first. She had no more tricks, but her eyes were still keen. She hurled her knife straight into his heart.

Now only the leader remained. He came at her slowly, eyes narrowed, jaw clenched. The branches that had kept her safe up to now held her captive, an easy prey. He stuck his good arm through the branches and grabbed a handful

of her hair. "You'd better be worth it," he began, licking his lips.

He dragged her out of her hiding place, yanking when her clothing caught on a branch or a thorn poked her side. Then he pushed her to the ground and straddled her. "You cost me three good men." His hand reached out for her tattered shirt, but instead of ripping it away he jerked upward and collapsed on top of her.

The man's weight pinned Anatella to the ground. She waited three full breaths before she realized he was dead. Cautiously she pulled herself out from under the outlaw. An ornately carved green spear stuck out of his back. She turned toward the river, the direction from which the spear had come, sure an even meaner, more vicious outlaw waited.

What she saw there confused her, for the man in the water could barely be called human. He was tall and thin, with webbing between his fingers and toes. His hair and skin were pale, with a silver tinge. His eyes were like green diamonds set deep within their sockets. Slits marked either side of his long neck.

Water dripping from his hair and scant clothing, he looked at her solemnly, then took one step forward.

"Stay away!" she begged.

"I mean you no harm." His voice was soft and low. He wrenched his spear out of the dead man, then squatted before her, just out of reach.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Friend," was his only reply. He held his hand out to her; nodded gently when she began to relax. Anatella's shock at the outlaw's threats and sudden death slowly faded. Now all her aches and cuts began to throb with pain. She closed her eyes and let her head sink back in exhaustion. In two steps the strange man reached her side. His touch was cool and gentle, she sensed his manner, concerned.

Before she knew it he had picked her up, large though she was, and carried her into the river. He scooped up

some floating algae, squeezed it dry, then dabbed her forehead and eyes. "Don't try to move," he said.

But she had to move. She was suddenly surrounded by more water than she had ever seen before. "Take me back to shore. Just leave me there. I'll be fine," she said weakly.

"But your wounds need tending." He took her deeper and deeper into the water, until she was almost afloat.

"Take me back!" she pleaded. "I can't swim!"

"But I can." He laughed gently and tightened his hold on her. Anatella closed her eyes to the terrifying wetness.

"Wait! My horse!"

The man looking down at her sighed. He carried her back to shore, then freed her gelding, the mare, and the outlaws' horses as well.

"Now will you let me help you?" he asked, kneeling at her side.

She searched those strange eyes and felt as though she might lose herself. "But I don't even know your name," she whispered.

"My name is Olcarias. I am of the Krogan, and I would care for you at my home until your wounds have healed. May I take you there?"

Their eyes met. "Yes."

Gently, he floated her downstream. She calmed herself by concentrating on his strength and confidence. Soon they reached the river island where he lived with many other pale-skinned water people.

Anatella forgot her pains in the wonders that she saw: soft plumed trees rooted in the fine white sand, fragrant yellow and green blossoms, water children frolicking with huge aquatic mammals. The people stayed back from her until Olcarias signaled to one woman in a light yellow drape who hurried to his side and shook her head at the sight of all Anatella's wounds.

The woman was a healer. She dealt with Anatella's cuts and bruises quickly, using strange and mysterious herbs. When Anatella was well enough to sit up she helped the

healer, sorting herbs, preparing bandages, and mixing salves. Though she was never asked, Anatella continued to work with the healer long after the wounds healed, repaying her debt with an hour of service here, an hour there.

The rest of the time she clung to Olcarias as her foremost friend and he introduced her to his world. Each day he showed her something more marvelous than the day before, from shells that glowed underwater to the asp's half-submerged dome house. Even when she worked with the healer he was never far. She would look up now and then to catch him watching from the corner of his eye, and they would laugh.

"Why do you watch me so?" she asked one day.

"Because your strange eyes mirror my world." He paused. "Everything you see is reflected back, the same yet different. Through you, I see as if for the first time, and realize how much I love life." Anatella laughed again.

Although the water people's ways seemed strange at first, she welcomed the differences. Here, there was little to remind her of her father's horrible death, little to inspire panicked dreams of the chase. She tried to fit in as best she could, even learning to swim, but always she felt handicapped, because she had neither the webbing nor the gills that made the water people so well suited to their aquatic life.

As fall turned the feathery leaves to skeletons the water people became suddenly subdued. Their life took on a strange kind of purpose, previously lacking, and everyone worked together preparing for some special festival.

"What is going on?" she asked Olcarias when no one else was about.

"The Donta are leaving," he said. There was no smile on his lips now.

"The Donta?"

He nodded to the river where the children played intensely with the brown-furred creatures. "Our animal friends."

"But I thought they were pets. They're leaving? Why? How do you know?"

"They leave every year at this time, to swim downriver to the sea, where the waters never freeze, even in the coldest winters."

"But they'll come back, won't they?"

"Yes." For some reason even this knowledge did not comfort him.

"Then why are you all so solemn?"

He looked at her as he would a child who refused to understand. Then the stern look faded from his face and he led her to the quiet cove that had become their own special place. He held her hand loosely, toying with her fingers a while before turning to her.

"There are parts of the Krogan way of life that none of your kind has ever known."

Anatella felt she should say something, but she knew not how to respond.

"We Krogan trace our heritage back to the time of the Old Ones, but what happened then has always been cloaked in mystery. Some things we know, others we do not. The Donta are one of the things we know." He shifted his weight so his whole body faced her.

"The Donta are not pets, or wild animals, or beings over which we have dominance. The Donta are our equals because the Donta are . . ."

Anatella watched Olcarias struggling with the words, perhaps even struggling with the decision to explain this secret to her. Finally he took a deep breath and said, "Death holds no reins over the water people. We fear it not for we know that death is but another journey. It ends in new life. For us new life as Donta, for the Donta, new life as men. It is a circle never ending."

After he'd said it he turned away from her, cutting her off, forcing her to look out at the water and the children frolicking with the Donta pups. The scene only served to distance Anatella from the people she had come to love.

Try as she might she could not think of the soft brown creatures as anything more than friendly animals.

Anatella saw now that days had turned into months and she had accepted the Krogan as her own people, wallowing in security to which she had no right. She held her webless hand in front of her face and said, "The winter affects more than just Donta. Soon the countryside between here and my home will be impassable. I should leave also."

"No! Not you too!" Olcarias's words seemed to explode from him, shocking them both. "I mean, why leave at all?" he said more calmly. "You have no family or friends there. Unless . . . unless the mountains call you so strongly."

"No. The mountains have no power over me, not like the water over you, but . . ."

"Do you feel unwelcome here?"

"Of course not. I feel like an honored guest."

He nodded, as if he understood that she wanted to be needed and accepted in a way no guest could ever be. "But leaving is not the only solution," he pointed out.

Anatella felt his closeness and her pulse quickened. "I can make you one of us, as easy as this . . ." he said, kissing her gently.

They married in the fall, and while his people added an "S" to his name because he had married outside of his clan, they also accepted Anatella as a new addition to their family. In her eighteenth summer Anatella bore her first child.

In most respects the babe resembled his mother. There was no sign of the webbed feet or gills. His hair was a light golden yellow, halfway between her brown and his father's silver, and his eyes were human-looking but green. From his father he inherited a love of water that had no bounds.

Anatella bore three more children. The next two were boys, human like the first. The final babe, a tiny girl, was the image of her father. They named her Omala for the morning star under which she was born.

The happy family knew much joy for many years. Every spring they celebrated the coming of the sacred Donta,

swimming and singing a gay farewell to the winter ice. Every fall they waved a tearful good-bye as their aquatic friends set off on the long journey back to the warmth of the sea.

The large playful Donta intrigued Anatella. She studied them often, seeking some sign that the Krogan legend was true. She needed to believe that her loved ones would never be lost to her as her father was now. When doubt crept into her thoughts she shook them away, taking comfort in the knowledge that their deaths might not come for many, many years; on this peaceful idyllic island, surely her family was safe.

One spring morning Anatella sat on the island's sandy beach, working the skin of a strange water creature into pliable leather. Now and then the children's laughter and low Donta calls were too much to ignore. Then she would stop her work long enough to watch the water children hold onto their Donta mounts as the animals leaped high into the air, spinning and flapping through a water obstacle course.

Her own boys she picked out easily, with their yellow hair and their Donta's frequent obliging trips to the surface for air. Omala, she noticed, stayed far from the others, foregoing the play, choosing instead to help a small crippled Donta learn to swim.

The older Donta lay half-submerged in the marshy edges of the river, pulling up lilies and tamdour to eat the bulbous roots, nibbling on the rushes tender new growth. Suddenly Anatella noticed a group of strange bristle-covered monsters approaching the marsh. They were hunchbacked ugly creatures, with sharp claws and drooling pointy mouths.

Anatella had heard of the Thas, and the sight of them caused her heart to miss a beat. Before she had time to raise the warning conch shell, they attacked the resting Donta, slitting their chests and throats with the swipe of a paw. Anatella gagged at the brutality of the Thas, but still

she forced her lips to purse and managed to blow a single pleading note of alarm. Then Anatella dropped the shell and screamed.

Of all the water people, only little Omala was near enough to aid the Donta. Anatella watched, horrified, as her daughter unsheathed her small fishing knife and hurried toward the slaughter. Anatella dove into the water herself and hurried to her daughter's aid, knowing all the while that there was no way she could cross the river in time.

"Omala, no!" Anatella yelled when she surfaced, but the girl did not hear. The small golden-haired child crept up behind a monster that struggled with a limp carcass three times its weight.

"Help!" Anatella cried as she caught her breath a second time. The shore was still hopelessly far away. "Save her! Dussa, please do not let my daughter die," she begged of the first of her island friends to reach the beach. Then she struck out for the shore again, this time keeping her head above water so she would not lose sight of her precious child.

Omala tiptoed up close behind the monster, knife raised. When she was within striking distance she brought the blade down onto the base of its skull, but the animal's skin must have been thick indeed, for instead of falling the creature swung around. Its knife-sharp claws cut through the air. Omala collapsed at its feet.

The sight burned itself into Anatella's brain, to replay over and over whenever she closed her eyes. Anatella swam faster, harder, drawn by the sight of her daughter being dragged limply away. After they were out of sight she still watched. She was unaware of the water through which she swam, until the smell of death distracted her and she looked down at the swirling liquid, stained with blood.

By this time the water people had caught up with her. No bodies remained. They found only reddened soil and a path of well-trodden vegetation. The path ended at a cancerous hole in the ground larger than normal for the Thas,

as if they had planned all along to kill the Donta, and had dug their tunnel large enough to accommodate the Donta's bulk.

Anatella could barely speak. S'Olcarias, when he returned from inspecting the Thas digging, wrapped her in his arms and they clung to each other for support.

The Krogan chief murmured something to a group of men and they hurried to the island. He signaled to the women who swam off to intercept the children before their curiosity brought them face-to-face with the scene of death.

Soon the men returned, each laden with an armful of spears. One by one the men retrieved their own spears. The last weapon belonged to S'Olcarias. He took it wordlessly, ran his hand up and down its length, fingered the point. The chief nodded and the men set off in pursuit of the Thas.

"Kill them for me," Anatella whispered. But as S'Olcarias turned to join the other men she called, "No, don't go. What if . . ."

He hurried back to her and held her against his chest. "I have no choice," he told her. "She was our daughter. I must."

"I know. But if something should happen to you . . . If you should die . . ."

"Death is but another journey, remember?" he said with a half smile. "I would prefer to make all journeys with you, but we cannot always choose the path we follow."

"But I need you so. And I love you."

"And the love I feel for you is so strong that nothing will keep us apart for long. Take heart, mirror to my soul." Then he kissed her, and strode away without looking back.

Anatella sat vigil by the carved stone meeting chair. She fought against sleep, afraid to close her eyes lest her memories be given new life. "I could have saved her," she told herself. "If I had been Krogan I could have reached her in time and she'd be alive now." When she wasn't feeling guilty her body shook with fear for her husband.

At dusk of the second day the men returned. They barely looked Krogan. Their faces and necks were brown from dirt, yet their bodies had been washed clean in the river. Their shoulders hunched forward under the burden of the three bodies they brought with them.

Anatella was sure one of the bodies would be Omala. She ran to the first litter, then the second, but even the third litter carried a body too large for her darling daughter.

"S'Olcarias!" she screamed when she saw the final dead man's face. As with the other dead men, his precious spear had been split down the middle. Bark from a cork tree had been wrapped around the two halves, forming a litter that also served as a raft.

Anatella knelt down by him. She tore off a piece of her skirt and tried to wipe the dirt and water off his still face. He seemed almost peaceful. Inch by inch she let her eyes travel his body, praying she would find no wound, that he might somehow be asleep. When her eyes reached his groin she saw the gash, festering already from the poison in the Thas's claws. But the cut had severed the artery and he had died even before the poison had time to work.

"Do something! You can do miracles. Save him," she pleaded to the healer. But the healer shook her head and turned away. S'Olcarias's mother took Anatella's hand and led her away.

Father and daughter would have been laid out on the island shore together, however of Omala there had been no sign. And so they formed her likeness out of grass and clay. The islanders mourned the deaths for three nights. Then they gently pulled Anatella away from the bodies and buried them in an underwater tomb.

The two people she had loved most were gone and Anatella could not bear to look upon any of the water people any longer. Each glimpse of silvery hair or a shimmering body in the water flooded her with memories and pain. Finally she decided to leave. Taking her three sons, she set off back over the mountains to the land of her father.

The townsfolk remembered Anatella and helped her begin a new life. They supplied her with a house, and supplies, and offered the two elder boys apprenticeships with the blacksmith. Word spread of her presence and hunters from all around brought their furs and pelts to Anatella to be tanned.

The boys found life in the village difficult and strange. Anatella had to teach them new names, new foods, new customs. Though they missed their home and friends, they tried hard to fit in, giving nary a word of complaint.

It wasn't until they had been back in the village almost two weeks that Anatella noticed a change in the boys. They seemed thinner and less active. They ate, but the food did not seem to nourish. They slept, but woke more tired than the night before.

Soon the eldest son took to his bed. Hour by hour his life slipped away from him as he withered and shrunk before Anatella's eyes. She tried every remedy she knew, but to no avail. Even the local wise woman could not help. Soon the other boys also became too ill to move around.

The villagers now shunned her, afraid the disease might spread. With nothing to lose, she loaded the boys onto a cart and headed for the nearest river, praying that from there she might be able to make her way back to the water people who were now her only hope.

As they neared the river, the oldest boy whimpered. Anatella pulled the wagon up beneath a shady tree and opened the flap to let in a bit of fresh air. The third son became delirious and pushed himself out of the wagon. He fell to the ground with a thud. Anatella tried to help him up but he fought her, pushing her away. The boy lay there a few minutes, then inched his way to the river.

At first he floated in the cool blue water. Anatella watched, amazed, as his flesh lost its slackness and his color returned. Little by little he began to move, then swim. "Mother!" he called. "The water!" She waded out to meet him and pulled him into her arms, pushed the wet hair out

of his face, then kissed him all over. The boy answered her with a welcome, bone-crushing hug.

Laughing, they climbed out onto the bank and ran to the wagon. Together they carried the other two boys to the water, to the cure.

She realized the boys had inherited more from their father than just the color of their hair and eyes. The water people could not stay out of water for more than a few hours. Anatella's children could not survive more than a few weeks.

The family moved nearer the river, but in the spring when the sun glinted on the water and the Donta swam by, Anatella slipped into another fit of remorse for she still could not believe her husband and precious child were now forever lost to her. The boys, hoping the farther she got from their island home, the better she might become, moved them farther and farther downstream every year. They watched Anatella's health and beauty fade as she lived her life torn between her lost loved ones and her living sons.

Finally, after ten years of running from memories, they could move no farther. They found themselves living on the edge of the sea.

"Did you see the Donta?" she asked them one evening. "Did you see them return?"

For years the sight of the Donta brought back heartache and pain. Now she spoke of them eagerly. Her sons looked at one another curiously before they nodded. "You have your father's blood in your veins," she told them. "And one day that may be you out there, dancing in the waves."

"If the story is really true."

"If? IF?" she questioned. "Look out there. Look at the Donta. Don't you see them? There, in the waves! See the large one with the smaller one always at his side? See how they frolic together, just as . . . just as . . ."

The boys exchanged glances, then the youngest took her hands. "Yes, Mother, we see. They are with us still."

"But don't you understand?" she whispered. "Don't you

see? I was an outsider. Even marriage could not make me one of them. I could not even save my own daughter's life." She paused to wipe away a tear. "I was born in the mountains, and if I return to the mountains in death I will never be with him again."

All that winter Anatella spent her days staring out to sea. When the warm winds signaled the ice thaws the Donta began their long journey upstream to their summer home. All, that is, except for one special pair that refused to leave. These swam as near the shore as they could without beaching. They frolicked with an intensity she had never seen before.

"They say the sea claims what is hers and never releases it," she remarked one evening. "Perhaps I can trick her into claiming me." The next morning the boys woke to find Anatella and their small boat gone. Of the Donta there was no sign.

The boys became frantic. They sought out boats and set sail in search of her. With the size and strength of their mother's race and a water sense from their father's they rode the waves like the Old Ones themselves. They traveled the coast asking at each seaside settlement for a beautiful brown-haired woman who sailed alone.

Provisions for the search were expensive, and the boys had little in the way of money, so they took on goods at one town to trade at the next. Soon they discovered they could earn enough at this to keep them fed and outfitted and to also loosen many tongues. Still, at each town the answer was the same and so S'Olcarias's sons decided to look even farther.

The old Sulcarman poked his grandson to be sure he was awake, then continued with his tale. "Before this time no man had ventured to cross the ocean. But the boys gave it not a thought. Once on the other side they discovered many new lands and many new peoples anxious for knowledge and goods from across the sea. But no word of Anatella.

“Rather than settle down and give up the search, they built their homes on their boats. Over the years each took on a wife and the wives bore them many sons. These children had just enough of the water people’s blood in them to love the sea like life itself, but not enough to make them ill when trading forced them onto land. They told the story of their mother to their own sons. They spoke of her beauty, her courage, and her love.”

“Like you’re telling us,” Loqutha said.

The old man nodded. “But the story isn’t over yet. You see, one winter many years later, one of the boys noticed three Donta swimming by the ship. At night he could hear their faint calls above the sound of the wind and waves. He was sure they were calling to him so he set out in the longboat to finish the quest on his own. One by one S’Olcarias’s other sons set out on their own solitary quests. Since then each generation has helped with the search when the time has come.”

He stretched his stiff muscles, then reached over to empty his pipe into the dying fire. Ortins’s head was beginning to nod again, but Loqutha followed him with her eyes as he shuffled over to his oiled sea chest, then back to the fire.

First he bent down to little Ortins. He laid his treasured Karsten battle sword on the tiny lap and kissed the boy’s fluttering eyelids. Then he wrapped a spider silk shawl around his daughter’s-in-law shoulders, and shoved a polished brass sextant into his son’s hesitant hands.

When he reached Loqutha he held out a gold inlaid spyglass, but she pushed it aside and squirmed into his arms.

“It is time for me to begin my own search for Anatella,” he told her. Then he handed her to her mother, who nodded, teary-eyed, and held her tight.

“Why now?” his son asked.

“My ancestors are calling me now. I hear my name in their cries. Tomorrow they might be gone.” The seaman shrugged on his thick wool coat and pulled a cap over his

ears. He pointed to his vacant chair. "Sit," he commanded his son. When he reached the door he turned and winked at Loqutha one last time. "Remember Anatella," he said, making the sign of Wottin. "And remember me. You know who you are."

Afterword

Writing, for me, is much like a quest. With "S'Olcarias's Sons" this was especially true. I focused on my favorite race of people and did my best to discover what made them "tick."

First I separated the facts as presented in Miss Norton's books from my own assumptions. Based on these facts I wrote the frame of the story, in which I satisfied my own curiosity as to the Sulcarmen's homelife. Next I searched through the folklore and legends of Witch World to learn about those earlier times before there were Sulcarmen and Dalesmen and Kolder. Always my mind kept returning to the Krogan, that amphibious race whose moral fiber so resembles the Sulcars' in their understanding of right and wrong, their solidarity and independence, their oneness with water. The more I learned about the Krogan, the clearer the central story became.

Still, my story was not complete. It lacked a thread tying the past to the present to the times to come. It lacked the one thing that makes life worth living: hope. The Donta brought that hope to me in a dream and have been with me ever since.

—LISA SWALLOW