

Birth

Adina Rubinoff

First Prize Winner

BSFS 2005 Young Writers' Contest

Potomac, MD

Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School

A long time ago, deep in space, a star shone. For eons and eons it glowed a steady yellow, sending its light and heat deep into the void. It witnessed the passing of comets. It studied the patterns of nebulae. It read the messages of its brothers and sisters, and it mourned every relative lost to black holes or the crush of time. It sat alone, and it waited.

The star had no way to measure time, but it was around the four billionth year of its long life when the girl came. Her flowing hair was the blue of a dwarf star, and her eyes glowed a deep yellow. She was seated upon a comet with her legs crossed at the knee. Her fingernails were ice, and she wore a string of small asteroids around her neck.

She stood in front of the star and bowed, silently presenting him with her compliments. He returned them, to the extent he could, in the flares and radiation that is the tongue of suns. In his long ages of reading the universe he had never heard of a being composed of the cosmos, and he watched her curiously.

Her work was strange. She darted here and there, collecting bits of dust and fragments of rock orbiting the star. Under her attentions they began to merge, forming a large mass of stone and ice. The girl worked fast, and the object was soon as big as she was. She gave it a push and it began to spin, rotating around its axis while it orbited the sun. It settled into its routine, steadily circling the star, and soon it had formed itself into a vaguely spherical shape.

The girl kept working, poking and prodding the ball of rock. The sun did not understand what she was doing, but it knew something was different. He could feel the sphere pulling at him, demanding his attention. Water formed on its surface, then drew back. The rock began to turn green. Wispy white clouds appeared. The sun had never seen such deep greens and blues before, or such soft whites, and they sat pleasantly on his sight.

Finally, the girl appeared satisfied and returned to stand before the sun, looking at him carefully. She spoke, the only words the sun ever heard her say, and though he knew no language besides his own, he understood her. "I leave her in your care," the girl said. "Watch over her well." She turned then and left, trailing comet dust behind her.

The sun glowed acceptance, and the earth warmed.

The Only One

Rebecca Goldstein

Second Prize Winner

BSFS 2005 Young Writers' Contest

Ellicott City, MD

Home-Schooled

For seventeen years Diona had not been able to sleep at night. It wasn't because she was restless or didn't want to sleep. It was a different sort of a problem, one that affected not only her, but her entire village, and every other in the Kingdom of Rattan. For when evening fell, the fog creatures came.

They were coming now. As Diona stared out her bedroom window, her breath creating little patches of white cloud on the glass, she could just make out the snaking wisps of grey fog as they slithered toward her house. Living in the middle of her village provided the advantage that she would be one of the last ones to be attacked by the fog creatures.

Clenching her sword even more tightly she stepped back from the window into the middle of the room, waiting with pounding heart and gasps of breath. Her only consolation was that every person in the Kingdom of Rattan was doing the same thing she was right now.

It was the same every evening. The creatures of her deepest fears, taking shape from the fog, came riding up on horses—she could hear the soft hoof-beats now—rode through the walls of her house—she could see their ghostly shapes pushing through the unyielding planks of wood—dismounted and surrounded her—she shuddered at their leering faces, some dead, some not even human at all—and attacked. Those that carried swords, the ones that had arms and hands, moved forward to engage her, while those that were mere thoughts, like death or chaos, attacked her mind. Thoughts of her beloved family, of her quaint village set in a pretty valley with no other village for miles around, overrun and destroyed by Rattan's enemy, the Vegurs, nearly overwhelmed her as she fought hand-to-hand combat. She fought to keep the scenes of ruin from her mind, from her house being destroyed and ransacked, her friends and family forced into chains and carted off to be slaves for the evil Vegurs. Mentally she began to build a wall to keep out the distracting and painful thoughts even as her sword clanged against those of the fog creatures, the ghostly outline of their blades somehow managing to become solid as they smashed against her blade.

Time seemed to disappear as Diona strengthened both her mind and body as she fought her deepest fears. It was a shock when suddenly both the fog and her opponents vanished. Sagging to the floor in exhaustion, her muscles sore and mind temporarily weakened, Diona almost missed the dawning of the new day as her eyelids sank down. Blinking rapidly to keep herself awake, Diona caught her breath as the full force and splendor of sunrise came. The sun rose up over the green sides of the valley, light shining proudly through her window, glinting

off her sword. Never had she missed a sunrise in her seventeen years.

However, she could no longer compete against her exhaustion. Her trembling fingers released the hilt of her sword. For a long while she just sat there, gazing out the window at the light in a trance-like state, and wondering, not for the first time, what it would be like to live in a world without fear.

"All right, darling, you're all done."

The voice floated through the warm and pleasant darkness that surrounded her. Forcing open her eyes, Diona found herself gazing into the friendly red eyes of the healer. Shaking her head to remove the last few cobwebs of sleep Diona got to her feet and stretched. Being put into a trance by the village healer was not as satisfying as sleep was (for Diona always managed to sneak an hour or two of sleep here and there, even though she wasn't supposed to) but it fully rested the body and mind in just a few minutes.

"Thank you, healer," said Diona politely, curtsying.

The healer bowed her head in reply, the ruby set in the circlet round her head glinting as the light of a candle reflected a thousand red squares onto the wooden walls of the house.

Stepping out into the warmth of the morning Diona gazed round her with content, watching the children sleeping beneath apple trees, the men boasting of how well they'd fought the previous evening, the women binding minor wounds and shaking their heads at the men's swaggering. In an hour the relaxation hour would be over and every villager, Diona included, would be off to the fields to harvest food or to the forests to hunt. It was the same every morning.

Catching sight of her mother, Diardina, Diona hurried up to her, falling in step beside her. For a moment she gazed lovingly at her mother. It was like gazing into a mirror as she admired the amber-colored eyes and hair, the strong cheekbones and flaring nose.

"Mother," Diona said presently as they came to the shucking house, where corn was shucked and set aside for storage, "Why do the fog creatures come?"

Stepping lightly over the many husks littering the green grass Diardina replied with a sigh, "I've told you many times, child, the tale-keeper tells us they were created by Savior Narsda thousands of years ago, to better shape us into warriors. It is in the Book of Rattan. How else are we to fight our enemies, the Vegurs, if our bodies and minds are not strong? The King of Rattan needs us to fight the enemy. What better way than this?"

Diona sat beside her mother on the wooden steps of the shucking house, watching the dry husks toss and tumble in

the wind as though young animals at play. She could not help but wonder what it would be like to not worry about the enemy Vegurs, not to worry about when night came, whether she would survive fighting her darkest fears. She had spoken to her mother once about peace, and had received such a harsh lecture that she had promised herself never to mention peace again. The memory drifted into her mind on the boat of recollection; she could hear her mother's soft voice turning harsh, her eyes gleaming gold in anger.

"We are fighters, Diona. We fight the fog creatures, the creatures of fear, because they make us stronger. Peace can never come, Diona. We have no allies beside the other villages in Rattan, but can you call our kinsfolk allies? How can you be the only one in this village, indeed in this *kingdom*, to speak of peace? Do not keep the word alive, squash it under your boots, let it loose to the winds of time! How can you dream of peace when it is in our blood to fight?"

The fog creatures were Rattan's greatest enemy and greatest ally at the same time. They weeded out and overcame the weak fighters, the ones that wouldn't survive in a battle against the neighboring enemy kingdom of Vegur, and in doing so served to strengthen the strong warriors. There was no greater way to become stronger than to fight one's own fears.

If only there were some way to permanently end the fighting between us and the Vegurs, Diona mused. And also prevent the fog creatures, the creatures of fear, from coming ever again. How many times can one be confronted with their darkest fears and escape mentally intact? They are our greatest enemy and our greatest ally.

As though Savior Narsda had descended from the Sun Hall and whispered cunning words into her ear, an idea grew into Diona's head. She stared at the cob of corn her mother had placed into her hands, unable to believe she hadn't thought of it before. It was a foolish idea, but...

But it might just work, she thought. If I can convince the fog creatures to become our greatest ally and not our enemy, we can defeat the Vegurs. But how to convince the creatures of her fears that she'd fought for many years to now fight beside her? Perhaps they'd listen to her. Tonight, when the sun sank below the horizon and she extinguished all but one candle in her bedroom, she'd try.

Diona held the sword loosely in her left hand, meeting the eyes of the creature in front of her. Rotting flesh hung from its translucent body; clothed in a ragged shirt and pants, it floated several inches off the floor. Fear held Diona's tongue captive. How could she speak to her fears, to these *horrors*?

A glint of light caught her eye. Glancing down, she stared at the diamond bracelet her father had given to her before he'd gone off to war against the Vegurs. That had been the last time she'd seen him. For a long moment she stood, caught in a trance, remembering his dark blue eyes (an oddity among the yellowed-eyed Rattan warriors), his wavy black hair, and the only feature she had inherited from him, his power to control light. Even as she remembered that, her body trembled, a ripple threatening to turn into a tidal wave. Her mother had given her strict instructions, ever since she'd discovered her unusual power fourteen years ago, to forget it

so that she wouldn't scare away the fog creatures when they came to fight her. Diona knew the other reason, the one her mother *hadn't* told her, was so that her fellow villagers wouldn't shun her for being an aberration, like they had her father. But obeying her rebellious nature, she had practiced in secret, tempering her power so that she created only enough light to illuminate a small room or a radius of two feet so as not to attract attention.

The bonds that had held back her power now broke. White light seeped through her ivory colored dress, emanating from her body, stretching out beyond her fair skin and stretching to enfold the room. For one long moment Diona was encased in a world of bright, white light. Her sword fell from her hand and clattered on the floor, forgotten.

It was as though she spoke through a veil of dreams. Her voice was softer, more distant; her thoughts could now see far beyond the night and into day.

"Hear me, o creatures of the fog, creatures of fear!" Diona cried, and there was a second voice that spoke with her own, one not heard for thousands of years. "The time has come for us to accept one another. My people have fought you for centuries to become better warriors. But there is no better way to conquer one's fears than to accept them. In doing so we will become more powerful than we could ever have been, borrowing off one another, drawing off one another's strengths and weaknesses. You fear light; I control it. I fear darkness; you constitute it. I accept you, my deepest, darkest fears, for what you are. You are a part of me. I will fight you no longer, for I will no longer fight myself. Will you do as your creator created you to do, and help me become a better warrior? Will you join my side to battle the one and only enemy of Rattan, the Vegurs?"

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They say she swoops down from the heavens, seated on a cloud of fog but with a white light shining around her. The enemy, the few that have survived and the even fewer that have told me their story, would not describe completely the spectacle that beset them, but said only that where day meets night and light meets darkness, she has met fear. She has met fear and not conquered it, not defeated it, but embraced it.

The Vegurs couldn't defend against her, for the powers of hope and of fear were turned against them with such ferocity that they could not do anything but flee. But how could one outrun the light and the darkness? one man asked me. For one embraces the other and a symbiotic relationship is created. An unbreakable relationship. She is merely the first light of dawn, though, for our kingdom. Others have followed her footsteps and the Kingdom of Rattan is now safe from any enemy. The word 'peace,' which had almost been forgotten, takes on a meaning once more.

It is quiet now, save for the song of insects and the whispers of the bright stars. My last words shall be, as my eyelids sink shut against the darkness of evening and I drift off to sleep, that I would not be sleeping now, were it not for you, Savior Diona.

-Tale-keeper, year of the Savior Diona

The People of the Sea

Rachel Lipsy

Third Prize Winner

BSFS 2005 Young Writers' Contest

Rockville, MD

Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School

Long, long ago, when humans numbered few upon the Earth, an island sailed the seas. This island was so long it stretched from the cold northern waters straight through the warm southern waters until it again reached the cold.

Of all the people on the Earth, one-third lived on the island. They lived among the woods and the fields, the rainforests and the meadows, the deserts and the mountains of the island. But they all had one thing in common, which separated them from the rest of the humans on Earth: they did not love the place they lived in. They did not revere the sunlight as it dappled green among the leaves of the trees. They did not worship the stars reflected in the mountain glaciers; or the cool earth as they lay in the meadows among the waving fronds of grass. They did not love the land; they loved the ocean.

The islanders looked at the sun sparkling silver off the top of the waves and called it a miracle. They heard the crash and sweep of the waves on the shore and danced to that music. They swam in the cool waters of the tranquil sea, thanking the waters for their bounty of life. They watched the stormy sea howl in its anger and marveled at the power it had, where others would have cowered in fear.

For this reason the islanders were chosen. Chosen not because they were special, or better than other humans; chosen because they had already chosen that life for themselves—yet had not the power to make it fully alive. So on the night of the full moon, the first night of the year, the Ocean Goddess came to the islanders. She appeared among them as they danced on the shore to welcome the new year. To each one She seemed as different as their vision of the ocean-sea. Powerful, or tranquil. Graceful, or passionate. To each islander She issued the same choice: to become one with the ocean or to stay rooted to the earth. Forever.

“And as you have Chosen, so mote it be!” She spoke with the Power of the divine. And the island melted away, sinking to merge with the ocean floor. The islanders were left floating on the rolling waves, drifting with the sea.

Then the wind began to howl. The waves churned, tossing the helpless islanders into the air, then dunking them under the salty waters. But the islanders did not scream, or cry, or gasp with fear. Their eyes shone with exhilaration, their arms spread wide to dance with the

waves, and they began to sing.

They sang of the ocean that spun and twirled them upon its waters. They sang of the waves they heard when they woke in the morning and lay down at night. They sang of the majesty, grandeur, wisdom they saw in the wide open seas. They sang of the sorrow and loneliness that lured them to the rainy waters. They sang of the passion, anger, power in the stormy waves; and of the harmony and tranquility that led them to the laughing crystal-blue sea.

And then they began to Change. Mixing with their visions of the sea, their bodies become more suited for the waters. Their legs flowed together, forming a tail and fin better suited for swimming. Their emotions swirled, to reflect the moods that the ocean displayed. Their voices matured until they could sing the haunting melody of the wave-tossed waters. And their bodies thinned, becoming powerful and flexible, able to dance with the currents.

Then the Ocean Goddess rose out of the waves and declared, “You are now the People of the Sea. Born anew from the wind-tossed waves you are brethren to the humans on land. But while they live out their life on earth, you shall live in the sea. To them you shall seem as ageless as the ocean itself. But when your time comes, I shall be there to lead you to your next existence.”

Then the People of the Sea were joyous, and sang their praise of the Ocean Goddess. As one, they trilled their song and dove under the waves to their ocean kingdom below. And far away, humans heard their song, and marveled at it, calling it the song of the spirits.

The island which had melted away was needed no longer. For every islander had chosen, and become, a Person of the Sea.

In those early times, humans and sea-people mingled freely, forming friendships, connections and alliances between them. But slowly, humans became mistrustful of the strange people with tails where their legs should be. So they drifted apart, the People of the Sea rarely mixing with humans, until mere legends and myths remained of their kind. Some of those myths were truer than others, but many held a common thread. They talked of islanders who had so loved the ocean they had become part of it. And some called that island Atlantis.