

The Ringlets, newly settled in Antarctica from the rings of Saturn, are ready to go to war but refuse to negotiate with anyone over 17. Can young Gwen figure out what made them so angry soon enough to prevent an interspecies war?

Breaking the Ice

by

Justin Short



The icebergs were orange and purple tonight, and they were seriously gorgeous. Like, cotton-candy-fingers-against-a-perfect-sunset gorgeous.

“You see it, Gwen?”

Lon pointed over the ship's railing, and I tried to follow his finger.

There it was. A gigantic iceberg in the middle of all the others. Jagged and hilly. It shot from the dark water like a lonely volcano.

This whole Antarctic thing was tough sometimes. Mainly the temperature part. But it was worth it for views like this.

Did I mention the cold? I'm talking true, lung-freezing cold. And trust me, I wore layers. Lots of 'em. Three shirts, long johns, flannel jeans, thick boots. A puffy coat that zipped all the way to my chin and made me look like a loofah with feet.

"All right," Lon said. "Let's get this over with." He swung his leg over the railing and dropped into the tiny ship-to-shore boat. I followed him in. The sailor on duty lowered the boat down with the crank and jumped in after us. We hit the ocean with a splash, and I tried to keep the icy water from touching my skin.

"Just look at that sunset," I said.

Lon rolled his eyes.

Okay, so maybe Lon's not the friendliest person in the world. But he has other good qualities. I can't think of any at the moment, but they'll come to me.

The sailor turned on the trolling motor and we took off in the little boat, chopping along at a slow pace toward the ice. Before we made it very far, I noticed we weren't alone. A small metal raft moved out from among the icebergs and headed toward us. It was maybe five hundred feet away, so I couldn't quite make out the people on board.

Correction—the *ringlets* onboard.

The ringlets are new here. They used to live on the rings of Saturn. I guess they've been communicating with Earth since before I was born. Then two months ago, they suddenly decided to move here. They never said exactly why. Maybe it had something to do with all the radiation and space debris out there. Or maybe they just needed a change.

“Why’d they pick you two?” the sailor asked. “No offense. Just seems like a job for an ambassador or something.”

Lon laughed. “Ringlets don’t trust adults. Something about them being phony.”

The sailor gave him a strange look. “Uh-huh.”

I waited for Lon to tell him the rest of the story. How we entered the contest and were selected out of all the students in the country. He never missed a chance to brag, and this seemed like a perfect opportunity.

Instead, he made binoculars with his hands and watched the raft approach. After a few seconds, he turned his binoculars toward me. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I got this.”

“What do you mean, *you got this?*”

“Just let me handle the diplomatic mumbo-jumbo. I’m good at that junk.”

“Or we can, you know, *work together*. Like they told us at the embassy.”

He pretended not to hear me. Typical.

The ringlets in the raft were getting closer. There were two of them. They looked exactly like the pictures I saw in training. Their bodies were tall and thin and completely blue. Their heads, rectangular and wrinkled. I didn't remember seeing orange short shorts and moccasins in the official photos, but maybe that was the latest fashion.

The sailor cut the engine and we drifted toward them. “Good luck,” he coughed under his breath.

The other raft slowed as it approached, and soon we floated side by side. The ringlet on the left handed a rope to the sailor, who used it to lash both rafts together. He said something, but I couldn't understand a word. His language sounded like a mix of whale song and rushing water. It was beautiful—just wish I knew what it meant.

“I’ll interpret,” the other ringlet said. “Greetings, humans. On this most glorious night, with the stars burning wonderfully in the heavens, we graciously--”

“Nice to meet you,” Lon said. “So how can we help?”

The ringlets stared at one another. I’m sure they weren’t used to being interrupted like that. I mean, it made me feel pretty awkward. But I’m sure he didn’t do it on purpose.

“The king is angry,” the interpreter said.

“He is?”

“Yes. He is angry because your world destroys our homes. He asks why you banish us to the place where the sea swallows--”

“Whoa, wait. Did something bad happen?”

The ringlets looked at me in disbelief. I thought about saying something, but I kept my mouth shut.

“Yes, our homes have been--”

“Destroyed? I’m so sorry to hear that, guys. How can we help?”

That was my cue. Time to take over before things got any worse. I stepped between Lon and the ringlets. “Sorry for the interruptions,” I said. “I’m not sure what happened, but I’d really like to help. Is there anything we can do?”

“The king would like a meeting. He wants to avoid a war.”

Whoa. Hold up. A war? They didn’t tell me it was this serious.

I gulped. “I’d be glad to meet with him and work it all out.”

“Please come aboard.”

I stepped over to their raft. Lon started to follow me, but one of the ringlets held out a hand and blocked him. “The king does not welcome interrupters.”

Lon looked surprised. “What? Man, I was only trying to help.”

The ringlets didn’t change their minds. And they didn’t invite the sailor either. Just me.

Lon leaned his head close to mine. “Guess it’s up to you now. So, uh...no pressure.”

Thanks, Lon. Just the encouragement I needed.

I sat between the ringlets and we moved back toward the ice. Not sure exactly how we moved, come to think of it. I didn’t see any source of power. No engine, no sails, no oars. Just two blue guys and a piece of silvery metal that seemed to have a mind of its own.

“We forgot introductions,” the interpreter said. “I’m Mimas. This is Janus.”

“Gwen.”

“Good to know you, Gwen.”

“Likewise. Nice to meet you.”

The ringlets seemed friendly. I wondered if I could trust them. I wanted to, but it was too soon. I only just met them, after all. Now I was alone on their raft in the middle of the freezing ocean. I hoped they weren't leading me into a trap.

I thought about the contest. The announcement from the president about how the ringlets wanted to resettle on Earth, and how they wouldn't accept meetings with dignitaries or diplomats or normal ambassadors. They wanted someone younger.

All the principals got together and decided a nationwide essay-writing contest was the way to go. *Describe why you would be the perfect choice to meet the aliens. Use complete sentences. Cite at least three external sources. 8 to 10 pages, typed.*

Just my kind of contest.

Some kid out in Alabama took first place. He got to be the space ambassador and meet the ringlets in a capsule orbiting Earth and everything. He learned how they

needed ice and coldness, and found them a place to live down here on the icebergs.

Somehow Lon and I tied for second. It was nice to get the framed certificate, but not nearly as nice as meeting aliens face-to-face.

And then the ringlets contacted our embassy. They had a problem.

Not trusting adults, they wouldn't say exactly what it was. But the embassy worker wanted us to be prepared for anything. So she arranged for us to miss school and go to two weeks of special training.

I learned all about being a diplomat. I learned how the ringlets hold their utensils and how they greet strangers. The way their society works, the way they pass laws, all that.

And I spent hours studying ice. When it freezes, when it thaws. How it interacts with cold water. Hot water. The temperatures needed for hail versus sleet versus snow.

It was a lot of pressure. Kind of intimidating. The ringlets came from a world of ice. They were experts. How could I possibly use any of this to help them? But I did my best to pay attention anyway.

Now it was showtime. The ringlets had a problem, and it was up to me to figure it out.



The iceberg was even more impressive up close. It had to be several miles wide. We floated toward its right side. Over here the ice rose maybe twenty or thirty feet from the ocean. As my eyes moved along its bumpy surface, I watched it rise gradually until it formed a regular mountain of ice in the middle. It was majestic, especially with the purple twilight throwing shadows on the snow and reflections in the black water.

On the surface, I saw ringlets moving to and fro. I caught glimpses of tiny houses here and there. Igloos, almost.

We floated to the sheer ice wall, and then our raft rose straight into the air. I didn't have time to be surprised.

Before I stopped to think about it, we were already safe and dry on the snowy ground above.

A blue man waited for us. He stood in front of a massive snow fortress. It had icicle guard towers and snowy ramparts and an awesome icy drawbridge.

“This is the king,” Mimas said.

The king didn’t look any different than the rest of them. No special jewelry or anything. The same neon orange short shorts. But he looked pretty upset. His face was scrunched up, and he spoke to Mimas in a loud, deep voice. He might have been yelling, but it’s hard to say. Their language made it sound more like a lullaby.

“You don’t need to hear all this,” Mimas said, “but I’ll summarize. He’s saying how this would never happen back home. We never worried about plunging into the abyss there. He considers this a personal attack by your planet.”

Wait. Plunging into the abyss? What does he mean? There’s no abyss here.

“Mimas?”

“Yes?”

“Can I see what happened?”

“Right this way.”

The three ringlets led me down a snowy path that led right to an edge. The king swept his hand over nothingness. I looked from the jagged ice cliff to the frigid ocean below.

“Yesterday this was a village. Twenty homes. Now, everything is lost. The king says you must be prepared for retaliation.”

“What about the people who lived here? Are they...”

“They survived.”

“Thank goodness.”

I stared at the water for a few seconds. I listened to the wind and the creaking of the ice. I shivered and stamped

my feet to keep them from going numb. Meanwhile the ringlets looked like they were enjoying a day at the beach.

“You like the cold, don’t you?” I asked. “I mean, where you used to live, it was all ice.”

Mimas said something to the king, and the king responded with a hand gesture and shrill whistle. “It’s one thing to be cold; it’s another to be miserable. That’s why we came here.”

Suddenly I understood the short shorts. “So you wanted someplace warmer.”

“Oh yes,” Mimas said. “It was far too cold back home. Of course, cold was all we ever knew. At least until we started learning about your world.”

It was far too cold back home. I guess it’s always cold there. So cold that the ice could never...wait a second!

“I just thought of something,” I said. “I think I know what’s going on here.”

Mimas mumbled something to the king, and the king sang a quick solo.

“The king says this better be good.”

I took a deep breath. “I’ll try. It’s called ice calving.”

“Calving? I’m not familiar with that word.”

“What about cows?”

“Cows I understand.”

“Okay. Calving is when a cow has a baby. This is similar. Well, not really. Not sure why they call it that. But I’m getting off-track.”

They stared at me expectantly.

“Sometimes the edge of an iceberg breaks off and drops into the ocean. Boom! Just like that.”

The king frowned and whispered something to Mimas.

“Why?”

I took a breath and hoped I remembered everything correctly. “Different reasons. Sometimes the ice gets too warm, and some of it melts and starts to crack. The cracks go down inside the iceberg and make it weak. Eventually a chunk snaps off.”

“So it’s not an act of war?”

I smiled. “It’s all natural. That’s how this whole iceberg was born, if you want to think of it that way. It fell off a glacier somewhere.”

The king shook his head and muttered something to Mimas.

“Your ambassador told us *this* was a glacier. Now you tell us it *came from* a glacier?”

I felt like Mr. Simmons, my old science teacher. Except I wasn’t wearing a turtleneck and didn’t have a Mount Fuji tattoo on my wrist.

“Close,” I said. “You live on an iceberg. Icebergs are pieces of ice that break off from glaciers or other icebergs. Glaciers are giant collections of snow and ice

that move really slowly. They form when the ice and snow collects faster than it melts or breaks off.”

They whispered for a few minutes before Mimas looked at me again. “The king is grateful for the explanation,” he said. “He says the war is off.”

“That’s wonderful.”

“Quite an interesting world, Miss Gwen. We never came across anything like ice calving back home. I suppose it was much too cold. Anyway, the king would like to ask your advice on a new place to live.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I just smiled.



The king invited me to dinner in his ice fort. I’m sure it would have been amazing, but I thought of Lon and the sailor waiting for me, getting cold. I had to say no. We had a nice conversation about real estate in Antarctica, then said our goodbyes.

Janus and Mimas walked me back to the icy cliff and we boarded the metal raft. It carried us down to the water, and soon we pulled up beside the ship-to-shore boat. Lon and the sailor waited for me.

“I hope we meet again,” Mimas said.

I waved at them. “Me too.”

Their raft took them back toward the ice. A few seconds later, they were gone.

Lon looked cold and grumpy. I guess I couldn’t blame him. He’d been waiting out here a long time. “So what happened?” he asked.

“Well, the ringlets had a problem. They thought we were attacking them, but once we got to talking--”

“Got it,” he said. “Well, that was easy enough. Can’t wait to tell Miss Martinez how we saved the planet and everything.”

The sailor turned around and gave Lon a funny look. Lon lowered his head and mumbled into his mittens.

I sighed and wondered if I would ever see the ringlets again. Maybe they'd invite me to their new place in Antarctica. I could learn some of their language, explore the snowy hills, and do some serious sledding. Yeah, that would be sweet.

But right now, it was time to get back onboard. Before I did, I took one last look into the darkness. The giant iceberg eclipsed the yellow moon and turned the night sky into a spooky French painting.

It was pretty epic, I gotta say.



Justin Short lives in Missouri. His fiction has previously appeared in places like *The Arcanist*, *DarkFuse Magazine*, and *Dear Abby*. Find out more at www.justin-short.com.

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