

Witness to Extinction

Synopsis

The first undisputed gravity wave ever recorded distorts time, knocks out satellites and is accompanied by tsunamis, earthquakes and increased volcanic activity. It is followed by two more over a period of several months which set in train climate chaos and which affects the mental balance of all life forms, older people especially, who succumb to depression and despair.

Eric Jensen, a climate specialist who provides weather predictions to private clients, discovers the gravity waves are caused by a cyclical event that was responsible for the two great extinctions of the past.

As the northern climate heads into the grip of the worst winter ever recorded, industry and commerce falter, and a religious sect, within which a sinister cult operates, uses Eric's dire weather prediction to gain adherents before the expected apocalypse. Eric falls in love with the beautiful investigative reporter, Zona Royale, whose daughter has joined the sect. Although Zona does not return his love due to her traumatic past he helps her expose the cult, however they kidnap Zona and attempt to kill Eric, who has to use all his skills to get Zona back and rescue the daughter.

The cult is destroyed as the final gravity wave strikes, but as all life teeters on the brink of extinction, nature pulls back slightly from total disaster.

FIRST CHAPTER

"Force six and building," Harstrom said, raising his voice against the slash of spray against the observation windows. "They'd better be damn quick pulling those drill rods or they'll lose them." With some difficulty he made his way across the A Deck laboratory and peered outside. It was a night without moon or stars yet the plunging bow of the 2000-ton research vessel, Ocean Explorer, threw up jagged streamers of white phosphorescent spume that sparkled in diamond brilliance under the ship's powerful floodlights, making him squint in the glare.

On the deck below him, half a dozen men toiled in the near freezing conditions. They worked with a sense of urgency, recovering the drill pipe from the hole they had finished just before the strengthening gale was about to make it impossible to keep the ship in position. The ship, anchored some 3000 kilometres northeast of Newfoundland, was over the Charlie Gibbs fracture, located a little east of the Mid Atlantic Ridge, and was there to investigate unusual seismic activity in the area and reports of pumice floating in the water.

Harstrom returned to his seat while his younger colleague, Dr. George Bickford, well anchored to his own seat, watched the seismic plotter. Bickford was battling to control his queasy stomach, but his fascination with the plotter's wild ink traces that registered the increasing activity in the seabed below kept him in the room against his digestive system's rising protests.

"Damn jet stream decided to check us out after all, eh!" Harstrom said.

Bickford winced. "Pity it couldn't have waited another day. I'm close to losing a fine dinner."

Harstrom, clearly troubled by the worsening conditions, worked his way over to the precision depth recorder registering the six-meter swell coming in from the northeast, then moved on to the anchor gauges. The engines, controlled by computer, used radio pulses from

the Navstar satellite system that could keep the ship within one meter of its target except in severe weather.

“How’re we looking?” Bickford asked, his face now yellow tinged with green.

“Ten percent reserve. It’ll be close.” Harstrom lurched his way across to the Navstar screen, watching the digital display of the latitude and longitude coordinates flicker slightly as the ship corrected its position continuously. “Drill pipe should be out in another ...” He paused in amazement as the digital readout vanished and the satellites it used ceased their transmission.

As Bickford straightened to see what had caught Harstrom’s attention he saw the older man buckle and then slump to the floor, but he was in no position to help for at the same time he was aware of a weird sensation; the light dimmed, sounds faded and giddiness swept over him before he blacked out temporarily. He recovered quickly and moved to help Harstrom.

“Christ!” Harstrom said, grabbing Bickford’s outstretched hand as he got up. “Did you feel it?” He spoke hoarsely, his eyes full of suppressed excitement.

“Bit of a dizzy spell?”

“Time, man, time! Couldn't you feel it?”

“I was hallucinating too; it was weird.”

“It was no damn hallucination. It was real.” Harstrom closed his eyes for a moment. As he spoke again, his voice, still hoarse, became more reflective. “It was like seeing into infinity, the future and the past.”

“We’ve lost the satellites! All of them,” Bickford said, disbelief in his voice as he looked at the screen.

The noise from the engine changed suddenly as the interplay between computer and satellite became meaningless. Moments later there was a screech of metal as the drill pipe snapped, followed immediately by shouts and the sound of running feet. The Ocean Explorer started to roll as it swung broadside to the wind, its auto guidance now useless.

The seismic plotter’s sudden chatter distracted them and the ship juddered to a massive punch from below, so strong that it seemed to lift them bodily above the waves. At the same moment the anchor winches screamed, their contact with the ocean floor vanishing as the seabed dropped away.

“My God!” Bickford had turned white and his voice rose as he took in the magnitude of the seismic data that was now registering. “It’s above Scale 9. We’re right over it.”

They peered out into the night. The waves, which seconds before had been rolling before the gale, were now peaked and chaotic. They could feel the ship trembling from the changes due to the ocean floor’s subsidence. As they watched it seemed that a depression had formed in the floodlit ocean. Ripples and vibrations danced over the surface and a welter of bubbles rose from gases released along the fault line, turning the surface to foam. The ship began to founder as gas replaced water and, far out, the water on the edges of the depression began to rush in to fill the void. Before the waves could overwhelm them, the Ocean Explorer sank into the depths, its electronic secrets locked away.

On the surface, the tsunami, created by the crustal movement, spread as a dark ripple, unaffected by wind and waves. Although only twenty centimetres high, it raced through the sea at 750 kilometres an hour, encrypted with a terrible message of destruction, which would see it rise to forty meters in height as it reached the coastline shallows to destroy thousands of lives. Terrible though it was, it was merely the harbinger of a much greater destruction that was at that moment sweeping towards earth.

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Ross Sutherland sped down the sandy track to the Weber gravity station on the Wallingup Plain of Western Australia. Ahead of him the two buried arms of the gravity detector stretched into the distance, each three kilometres long. Water, pumped from the bores in the sandy soil, had created a small green oasis of lawn and tall palms had grown up to shade a low concrete building.

He pulled up in the covered parking area. The caretaker’s dog was huddled in a corner and he clicked his fingers. Normally it scampered around him but today it just hung its

head. He moved to pat it but it slunk off, tail between its legs.

Inside, Sutherland poured himself a cup of coffee and began to check the night's readings. The laser gravitational wave station was one of five that had recently been upgraded; they would form a worldwide network that might finally pin down the elusive waves that Einstein's theory of relativity had predicted but which no one had satisfactorily proved in practice. It now needed only some fine-tuning to be fully functional and already it had begun to detect anomalies. The results were mired in controversy however; they were too regular, and far too strong, and had been put down to everything from trucks on the road to the station expanding and contracting in the heat.

On this particular morning, with his thoughts turned to Christmas, he passed over the latest anomaly before it registered in his mind. He scrolled back to re-examine it. It was the classical interference pattern expected and so strong it might have registered on Perth University's less sensitive niobium bar. If Perth confirmed the anomaly, it would settle the controversy and put Australia at the forefront of gravity research.

Excitedly, he picked up the phone, but at that moment giddiness overtook him and the phone fell from his hand. He shook his head as his mind cleared of what had seemed to be some sort of mental aberration, unaware that every living creature on earth had also felt it. He began to dial out but stopped suddenly and his eyes widened in shock. The Weber gravity station had gone off line; the whole system was down as if shaken to pieces. Outside, the caretaker's dog ran past the window, howling.

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Sean McDougall pushed his fishing boat through the choppy Irish waters at the mouth of the Shannon as he headed towards Loop Head. The lights of Kilbaha winked on the starboard side as the Atlantic swell began to make its presence felt. He could hear music faintly but it did nothing to cheer the bleakness of his soul since his weird turn a while back, when it seemed that death surrounded him and his ancestors were beckoning to their frigid gravesites. One moment he was standing at the wheel and the next he had fallen to the deck, his mind filled with black fear. Rob had felt it too but with the insouciance of youth had shrugged it off as of no concern.

As he now rounded the point and headed along the coastline, his teenage son entered the wheelhouse with two cups of coffee.

"Thanks, Rob," he took one gratefully. "Bugger of a night to be out; hold her for me, would you." As he sipped the coffee he glanced at the compass, noting the course starting to drift. "Keep her to the heading."

Robert looked puzzled. "I'm trying; she won't respond. What's the tide doing?"

"Coming in."

"You sure?"

"Would I be sailing all these years and not knowing?"

"It's behaving funny."

"Let me have it a minute." Robert was right. The boat barely responded to the wheel. The shore lights told him they were drifting seaward, as if caught in a cross current. He was as baffled as his son.

"What's that coming up?" Robert said, switching on the spotlights as they were swept towards a dark object.

Sean's mouth opened in shock. "A bloody rock! Impossible!"

They slid past far too close, the spotlights showing its oily black wetness, a giant tooth pushed up from the unfathomable deeps with foaming water rushing past. Although he didn't understand it, he realized that the sea level must have dropped and that they were caught in a rip. As he wrestled with the implications, he made a quick decision. Sensing danger, yet having no idea what was happening, he headed the boat directly out to sea, letting the current sweep him along. Moments later, they could feel the boat slowing and lifting as a great dark mass loomed out of the ocean.

"My God!" he said, as Rob redirected the spotlight. The mother of all swells was rushing towards them. He pushed the small craft to its maximum revs as they mounted it and such was its speed that they seemed to almost become airborne as it passed beneath.

“What was that?” Robert asked, his face alive with the excitement of death narrowly escaped.

Sean crossed himself. “Tidal wave, lad.” No sooner had he spoken than a great rolling thunder of noise echoed across the water from the land. A faint whiteness of broken water glinted in the distance, seeming to hang in the sky, so far was it above the shoreline.

“The lights!” Rob said in awe. “All the shore lights are gone.”

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Ninety minutes before the Atlantic Explorer began its descent into oblivion, a Boeing 787 out of London lifted off the runway on the second leg from Geneva to New York. Bad weather had delayed its departure and as it commenced its flight west, Eric Jensen stretched out his long legs in first class with a sigh of relief and closed his eyes. The World Climate Conference he had attended was now in the past and best forgotten, like the abandoned Kyoto Protocol. Despite his concern about a disturbing weather pattern that he could see developing, the delegates had decided almost unanimously to commit to the revised Global Climate Model or GCM as it was known. The model, far more powerful than previous versions, and now generally accepted and used by most countries in their weather forecasting, confirmed that the global warming trend had slowed as predicted some years back. As a result, most delegates were heading home in an optimistic frame of mind, secure in the knowledge that model predictions on climate change and sea level rise were now well understood and reliable but more importantly, that funding for lucrative climate research projects would continue for at least another five years. Not so Eric. Although he had presented his own model forcefully, which was far less sanguine, he was ignored, for he represented no government body, only private interests.

Feeling suddenly alone, he pulled a crinkled photograph from his wallet and studied the two smiling faces. His daughter Miele had freckles and the sunlight on her hair reflected a trace of red, giving it a light coppery tinge, to which the photo did full justice. Carrot top, he’d called her when he wanted to tease. It came from his side of the family. His wife, Nina, her dark hair at shoulder length and partially covering one eye, had her arm around Miele’s neck, pulling the girl against her; they were both laughing. It was a magical moment during a wonderful holiday. In the two years since their death, his sense of loss had not diminished but his grief had dulled to an empty ache. Miele would be eight—would have been eight—on December 18, one more week. He put the photo back and closed his eyes, sick at heart.

Later, when they were high above the Atlantic, the hostess stopped by his seat with a tray of drinks. She gave him a brilliant smile as he took one. “I hope you don’t mind me asking, Dr Jensen, but weren’t you once in the Olympic squad?”

He raised an eyebrow, his curiosity aroused. “Am I that famous?”

She coloured slightly. “I remember, because of my dad.”

He sat up, his interest awakened. “That was ten years ago. You would have barely made your teens?”

She smiled and knelt beside him. “I was eleven. My dad was in the Decathlon eight years before you; Clive Rowe.”

“Clive!” A smile of remembrance lit his face. “He was my coach. I recall he had a young daughter—pigtails, pink track suit.”

She laughed. “That was me. It was sad you never made the games. He said you were the best he’d trained. There’s still no one who’s got near your javelin throw.”

He was about to say something but suddenly darkness rushed in on him, stifling conversation. He was vaguely aware of screams from the passengers, then it died to be replaced by a tinkling noise in his head that reminded him of the sound water made gurgling over rocks when he swam below the surface. Then it seemed he was floating free above his body, like a spirit adrift with extrasensory powers. The sensation ended suddenly and he rushed back into his body with such speed and such a sense of falling that he gripped the armrests in alarm.

The hostess, less affected by whatever had overcome him, was already back on her feet and ignoring the now scattered tray of drinks, she made her way further down the cabin to help calm passengers, some of whom had become hysterical. Her journey was made

difficult however by the sudden the tilt of the plane as it began to nose down, the angle rapidly increasing.

Eric sensed approaching disaster as there seemed to be no reaction from the pilots for maybe fifteen to twenty seconds but finally he was pressed into his seat as the plane pulled out of its dive and began to regain altitude again. Moments later the captain's voice came over the intercom, sounding a little stressed.

"Sorry for that bit of unexpected turbulence. I would strongly advise that you do not move about the cabin unless absolutely necessary and to keep your seat belt fastened at all times."

What the captain did not say was that his automatic pilot was useless—all satellites had dropped out—his communication with ground control had also vanished and that he hoped like hell the satellites would be restored before they either got lost, hit another plane, or ran out of fuel.

Eric looked about with a feeling of disorientation. His surroundings seemed to have changed subtly, from the pattern of the fabric on the seat, the colour of the carpet and the shape of the windows. He sighed. The long hours he'd been putting in were taking their toll; roll on the Christmas break.

The TV, which had lost reception, came back to life some time later with a news flash but without a picture. "We apologise for that breakdown in satellite reception. We have a newsflash just to hand. A massive earthquake estimated at magnitude 9.4 has just been reported. A statement from the Lamont—Doherty Geological Observatory in New York states that this may prove to be the strongest ever recorded. The epicentre is in the North Atlantic, some 1500 kilometres from the nearest land and projected to have occurred along what is known as the Charlie Gibbs Fracture Zone. It has already triggered tsunami warnings and major evacuations are underway."

Eric gave a low whistle. He couldn't recall there'd ever been an earthquake anywhere of such magnitude; it defied the imagination to think of the destruction it would have caused if it had been near a city. He switched the TV off and began to doze once more until the captain spoke again, this time sounding a little calmer.

"My apology to any of you who may be sleeping but this is a sight none of you will want to miss. If you look out the starboard side, you'll see the northern lights, which tonight are quite spectacular. Unfortunately they play havoc with communications and for those of you making business calls you may have to wait until we land."

Later, as the Boeing, under radar guidance began its descent into New York, loneliness once again overtook him and he extracted the photograph from his wallet. Nina wouldn't be meeting him when he got into San Francisco; there'd be no daughter to hug. He stared at the photo with a puzzled frown. His daughter's hair reflected faint reddish tones yet she'd always been plain blonde, or had she? He was no longer sure. Was this just another aberration of his tired mind? He muttered to himself. The photo's colours were no longer true. He'd hunt up the original later and make another copy.