

FADE IN:

EXT. JUNGLE -- CRETACEOUS PERIOD -- DAY

A lush jungle vista. Tall trees encircle a pond. In the distance, mountains steam slightly in volcanic sleep. Exotic BIRD NOISES and the slow rush of a BABBLING BROOK break the otherwise peaceful silence.

SUPER TITLE: "THE CRETACEOUS PERIOD. 65 MILLION YEARS B.C."

A triceratops lowers its huge head to the water, laps up a drink. A giant apatasaurus munches lazily on some vegetation. Other dinosaurs graze nearby.

A blindingly bright light suddenly appears in the sky, outshining even the sun. The dinosaurs look up at it in puzzlement. A meteoric fireball streaks across the sky and disappears behind the mountains.

Then an enormous mushroom cloud blooms at the site of impact. Flaming rocks and molten earth explode into the atmosphere. Roiling clouds race across the sky. In less than thirty seconds, they blot out the sun.

Before the frightened dinosaurs can assimilate this new phenomenon, fiery debris begins to pour from the darkened sky. Thousands of flaming meteorites flash down, igniting everything they touch. Soon, the jungle is ABLAZE. The dinosaurs thrash about, SCREAMING. They have nowhere to run. The sound rises in PITCH and reaches a CRESCENDO as we...

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. DEEP SPACE

The dead calm of space. CREDITS. A slow PAN reveals the planet JUPITER. The SUN is visible in the distance.

A HUGE COMET suddenly enters frame, leaving a faint trail of gas and dust. As it nears the enormous gas giant, Jupiter's gravity pulls it onto a new course. The comet's trajectory slowly curves, until it heads directly into the inner solar system. Toward Earth.

SUPER TITLE: "PRESENT DAY."

SLOW PAN DOWN to an unobstructed view of stars and...

MATCH DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. CUESTA COLLEGE -- NIGHT

A matching starfield. The SLOW PAN DOWN continues, revealing a small OBSERVATORY on the similarly-small campus of a central California junior college. Students walk to classes.

INT. CUESTA COLLEGE OBSERVATORY -- NIGHT

Professor CASEY FLETCHER, late-30s, absentmindedly adjusts the telescope before him while his STUDENTS wait expectantly to look through it.

FLETCHER

Okay, what you're going to see is a close-up view of the surface of the Moon.

He addresses his students, but his mind is elsewhere.

FLETCHER (CONT'D)

We used to think the Moon's craters were volcanic. But we now know that they're the leftover remains of impacts by asteroids and comets.

A STUDENT looks through the telescope.

STUDENT #1

Cool.

TELESCOPE P.O.V.

A dramatic view of the Moon and its craters.

FLETCHER (V.O.)

Earth has been hit just as much as the Moon, but here, weather and erosion have erased most of the craters.

BACK TO SCENE

FLETCHER (CONT'D)

In fact, because of the absence of a large crater, it wasn't until 1980 that the extinction of the dinosaurs was linked to a cosmic collision. Since then, geological evidence has proven--

Two STUDENTS gossip in the corner, ignoring Fletcher.

FLETCHER (CONT'D)

(to the pair)

Excuse me, Charles, Sherri, are we interrupting you?

SHERRI
 (sheepish)
 Sorry...

FLETCHER
 (continuing)
 Look at these craters and try to imagine
 the destructive force that caused them.

CHARLES
 (interrupting)
 Doctor Fletcher, wasn't it you that
 claimed a comet was gonna hit us a few
 years ago?

Fletcher bristles at this suggestion, but avoids the
 question.

FLETCHER
 (waves toward the telescope)
 Just take a look so we can get back to
 class.

Charles struts over to the telescope, takes a cursory glance.

CHARLES
 Yep, that's the moon alright.

Fletcher scowls at him, begins herding the students out of
 the chamber.

EXT. CUESTA COLLEGE -- LATER -- NIGHT

Night classes have long since ended. A security guard in a
 golf cart drives across the deserted campus.

INT. CUESTA COLLEGE OBSERVATORY -- NIGHT

Alone now, Fletcher looks through the telescope.

EYEPiece P.O.V.

Although little more than a dim smudge with a faint tail, the
 stellar object in the viewfinder is immediately recognizable
 as a distant comet.

BACK TO SCENE

Fletcher straightens, walks into a small office to the side
 of the observing chamber. A few star charts, a poster of
 Einstein and a bookshelf lighten the otherwise Spartan decor.

Going to his desk, he rubs his tired face and sits. Opens a Kodak photo-finishing envelope and removes a black and white 8 x 10: an image of the same object from the telescope.

Picking up another similar photo, he flips the two up and down, comparing them. The comet's position relative to the stars around it changes in each photograph.

Fletcher takes out a star chart and calculator, starts scribbling on a notepad.

INT. JET PROPULSION LABORATORY, PASADENA -- NIGHT

JPL Director STEVE MASUI walks into a lab room. Astronomer ROLAND KAUFMANN stands at a printer next to a computer terminal. As Masui approaches, Kaufmann grabs a printout and hands it to Masui.

KAUFMANN

It's confirmed.

Masui's shoulders sag. Not what he wanted to hear, but what he expected nonetheless.

MASUI

Call the IAU. And the Pentagon.

(pause)

And Pizza Hut. We're going to be here all night.

INT. CUESTA COLLEGE OBSERVATORY -- NIGHT

Fletcher makes some final calculations on his notepad, enters the figures into the calculator. SHOCKED by the result. He re-enters the numbers, with identical effect.

FLETCHER

My God.

Getting up, he crosses to a bookshelf and studies it, searching for the right book. He finds it, removes it, grabs the bottle of whiskey stashed behind it.

A beautiful WOMAN smiles at him from a dusty picture frame on another shelf. He stares at it a moment before going back to the desk with the bottle. He pours a shot into a coffee cup.

Fletcher knocks back a drink, looks down at his desk bitterly. With a sudden jerk, he sweeps up all the photos and papers and dumps them into a trash can.

Suddenly, the phone RINGS. He picks it up.

FLETCHER

Hello?

MASUI (V.O.)

Hi, Casey. It's Steve. Masui.

FLETCHER

(surprise)

Really? To what do I owe this honor?

As he talks, he searches through a drawer, finds a pack of cigarettes buried underneath many papers. It's empty. He crumples it into a little ball.

MASUI (V.O.)

I want you to come down. We need your expertise.

FLETCHER

(sarcastic)

At JPL? They'll actually let me back on the premises?

MASUI (V.O.)

Listen, I know this is probably the last place you want to be, but something has come up. Palomar found a new comet...

(pause)

...and we think it might hit us.

Fletcher leans over, looks down at the astrophotographs in the trash can.

FLETCHER

You think it might hit us?

MASUI (V.O.)

We're recomputing our calculations hourly, but... it looks like the real thing this time.

FLETCHER

Oh sure, I thought the same thing six years ago.

He starts turning out the office lights.

MASUI (V.O.)

Yes. So you know how important this is.

(pause)

We'll pay for everything...

FLETCHER
 (stung)
 It's not the money.
 (pause)
 It's your job now. Forget it.

He hangs up, pours the last of the whiskey into his cup, drinks it down. The empty bottle stares back at him. He finally throws it in the trash, looks over at the PHOTO on the bookshelf.

FLETCHER
 Goddamn it.

He reaches out, grabs the phone. Dials "*-6-9."

MASUI (V.O.)
 This is Steve.

FLETCHER
 Tell me more.

EXT. NASA JET PROPULSION LABORATORY -- DAY

Fletcher pulls up to the gate in his beat-up pickup. Christmas garlands hang from the guard shack.

FLETCHER
 (to guard)
 Casey Fletcher to see the Director.

The GUARD, wearing a Santa Claus hat, looks up Fletcher in the computer, gives him a pass and waves him through.

INT. JET PROPULSION LABORATORY -- VARIOUS

Fletcher moves through the halls of JPL like he's walking back in time. Reaching Masui's office, he stares at the lettering on the door with a touch of bitterness.

ON DOOR

It reads, "DR. STEVEN MASUI, DIRECTOR, NASA JET PROPULSION LABORATORY".

INT. MASUI'S OFFICE -- DAY

Fletcher follows Masui's secretary ELLEN to the Director's office.

ELLEN
 (opening door)
 Dr. Fletcher's here.

She steps aside to let Fletcher in. Two scientists, Kaufmann and NOAH BERGSTROM sit inside with Masui.

MASUI
Thanks, Ellen.
(to scientists)
Will you two excuse us?

BERGSTROM
(to Fletcher)
Well, if it isn't Chicken Little.

KAUFMANN
(to Masui)
What's he doing here?

MASUI
I'll talk to you later, Roland.

Fletcher gives them an icy look as they EXIT.

MASUI
It's good to have you here again.

FLETCHER
I'm sure you'll understand if the
feeling's not mutual.

Masui motions for him to sit. Graying hair frames his careworn face.

MASUI
Okay. I'll get right to it.

He places a photograph in front of Fletcher. The quality is better, but it shows the same object as the photos from Fletcher's office.

MASUI (CONT'D)
This is Comet Reyes. Named after Arturo Reyes up at Palomar. He found it two days ago. It's big - about eight miles wide - and it's going to hit us in four months. The President called an emergency meeting at the Pentagon tomorrow morning.
(pause)
I want you there.

FLETCHER
That's why you had me come down? So a bunch of politicians can cut me up again?

Masui comes around his desk and sits next to Fletcher.

MASUI

Casey, you were wrong before, but you took all the right steps. Think of it as if last time were a drill, and this time it's for real. You've got experience, and I want you onboard. To hell with what anyone else thinks.

Fletcher goes to the window, looks down at the courtyard below.

FLETCHER

So I'm not here to take a fall in case you guys are wrong?

MASUI

Casey...
(stops himself)
No, I give you my word.

EXT. PENTAGON -- DAY

Morning sun shines off the Department of Defense HQ. Distant clouds threaten an otherwise beautiful day.

SUPER TITLE: "December 8, 1998".

A CLAMOR of arguing voices. One rises over the rest.

MCKEE (V.O.)

Can everyone calm down? We'll get nowhere if everyone talks at once.

INT. PENTAGON BRIEFING ROOM -- DAY

Masui stands at the head of a large table, flanked by a group of SCIENTISTS and POLITICIANS.

Fletcher, Kaufmann and Bergstrom sit on one side, opposite Admiral PHILIP MCKEE, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Senator CARLTON VOSS, the Senator's aide SAMUEL JESSOPS and other stuffed suits.

As the assembly quiets down...

MCKEE (CONT'D)

Thank you.
(to Masui)
Okay, Doctor, so it's going to hit the Pacific. How sure are you?

VOSS

(stares at Fletcher)

Yeah, the last thing we need is another false alarm.

Fletcher flinches at the Senator's remark.

MASUI

Japan, Great Britain and Russia have confirmed the course calculations. Unless we do something about it, we'll be going the way of the dinosaurs in four months.

(to Bergstrom)

Noah, can you give us a little background?

Bergstrom rises, begins speaking. It becomes immediately apparent that he learned his lecturing skills in front of a class of bored high school students.

BERGSTROM

Good morning. Comet Reyes was discovered two nights ago. It's a medium-sized comet, probably on its first trip in from the Oort Cloud. Considering how far out it still is, it's quite bright, almost magnitude 8. By the time it circles the sun and approaches us, the tail should be quite impressive--

Voss, a slick Southern career politician used to getting what he wants, breaks in.

VOSS

I don't care about the Astronomy 101 lesson. Gimme something I can chew on.

Bergstrom looks to Masui uncertainly.

MCKEE

(to Masui)

Doctor? Can we move this along?

MASUI

Right. Casey, why don't you jump in here?

Bergstrom glares at Fletcher as he sits.

FLETCHER

Fine. I'll make it very simple for you. If we want to live into next summer, our
(MORE)

FLETCHER (cont'd)
 only course of action is a series of
 stand-off nuclear explosions.

He crosses to a blackboard, begins sketching a diagram of the comet and its position relative to Earth.

FLETCHER (CONT'D)
 If we reach the comet far enough away,
 say 50 million miles, we'd only need to
 alter the comet's course by one hundredth
 or even one thousandth of a degree to be
 safe. A volley of warheads of about 10
 megatons each should be sufficient.

VOSS
 (antagonizing)
 Oh, I see. That is quite simple. We
 just go down to the local K-Mart and buy
 some nuclear weapons, shoot them at the
 comet--

FLETCHER
 (interrupting)
 Maybe you're not getting it. We'll all
 be dead in four months. If this comet
 hits us, it'll strike with over 100
million megatons of force, the equivalent
 energy of five billion Hiroshima-sized
 bombs.

As he speaks, he draws a line on the blackboard from the comet to Earth, then melodramatically obliterates the planet with large, swirling strokes of the chalk.

FLETCHER (CONT'D)
 (turns to politicians)
 You haven't given us the money we need to
 find these killer comets, and now we're
 paying the price.

VOSS
 (to McKee)
 Do we have to listen to--

MCKEE
 (interrupting)
 Carl, relax. Let's hear him out.
 (to Fletcher)
 Go ahead, Doctor.

Fletcher puts the chalk down, composes himself.

FLETCHER

(foreboding)

Okay. Let me tell you what will happen
if this comet does hit us. Fire and ice.
Mass destruction. Nuclear winter.

BEGIN MONTAGE

Violent scenes of destruction play over his dialogue...

A gigantic fireball slams into the PACIFIC OCEAN.

FLETCHER (V.O.)

(cont'd)

The impact of this comet will create a
crater more than 100 miles wide and 25
miles deep and will eject huge amounts of
bedrock and dust into the atmosphere.

A fiery storm of meteorites rains down on LONDON, creating a
blaze rivaling that of 1666.

FLETCHER (V.O.)

(cont'd)

The larger pieces will rain down as a
massive meteor shower, creating a planet-
wide firestorm.

Under pitch-black skies, a snow-covered harvester sits
abandoned in a KANSAS wheat field.

FLETCHER (V.O.)

(cont'd)

The dust will remain in the atmosphere
for months, blocking all sunlight and
bringing photosynthesis to a screeching
halt.

A small band of survivors roots through the charred remains
of TOKYO. Rotting bodies lie everywhere.

FLETCHER (V.O.)

(cont'd)

Freezing temperatures and famine will
kill off those spared by the initial
destruction. We can expect a minimum of
3 billion casualties, probably much more.
The end of civilization, if not mankind.

END MONTAGE

Masui braves the stunned silence following Fletcher's words.

MASUI

Thank you Casey, I think we all realize the grave danger posed by this comet.

(to the VIPs)

Doctor Kaufmann will give us some specifics on the interception plan. Roland?

BLACKBOARD

We hold on Fletcher's sketch of the comet's impact, then...

CUT TO:

INT. PENTAGON CORRIDOR -- DAY

Masui walks down the hallway, sandwiched between McKee and Voss. He looks as relaxed as a rabbit between two hounds.

VOSS

Tell me Doc, why'd you bring Fletcher into this? The man's a loose cannon.

MCKEE

The Senator's right, the last thing we need is another public panic on our hands.

MASUI

He knows more about cosmic collisions than anyone else I know. Besides, with what he's been through, I think he'll go strictly by the book.

They reach McKee's office, come to a stop.

VOSS

Well, I hope it's the Good Book he goes by. If he can cause riots when there's nothing out there, then just think what he can do--

MCKEE

Carl.

(to Masui)

Just make sure he's not at any press conferences. I'll be in touch.

McKee ENTERS his office. The Senator hangs back a moment, holds up the thick manila folder from the briefing.

VOSS

This has all the details, right?