

NIGHTFALL

by
George Lockhard

Based on I. Asimov's short story "Nightfall"

Revisions by

--

Current Revision by
George Lockhard

INFORMATION

The story takes place on the Earth-like planet of "Lagash", inhabited by indistinguishable from humans intelligent beings. Overall "look and feel" of Lagash society equals to that of the USA during sixties. Almost all scenes occur at the single location, a suburban observatory.

The main difference between Earth & Lagash is that Lagash' sky is populated with not one, but six Suns. Therefore, darkness is completely unknown - every inch of the planet's surface is constantly lit.

This affects many small details in society's everyday life; for example, they do not have any kind of light-producing technologies, say bulbs, LEDs or anything else. Cars do not have front- & taillights, in houses there are mirrors & prisms in place of chandeliers etc. This is very important; the movie's main theme involves coming of the first night in 2000 years, to which the people of Lagash are completely unprepared.

EXT. PROLOGUE: ENTERTAINMENT PARK - DAY - CHARACTER POV

FADE IN:

We look at a big entertainment park, styled after sixties' Disneyland or similar. This whole scene is shot from the unnamed character's POV. He feels himself very bad, he can hardly walk. Other people in the park, who notice the POV character's condition, stop and look at him, some start to discuss it with each other.

Finally, a tall man wearing uniform comes to help and tries to ask the POV character of his health. We do not hear a word - the voice is muted by the annoying buzzing sound, present only in the POV character's head. Suddenly, he falls to his knees, overtaken by headache. The tall man tries to help, some other rush in; soon the kneeled POV character is surrounded by small crowd. Through the buzzing sound we start to hear some fragments of the ongoing discussion.

FRAGMENTED VOICES

...what's happened? Is he all
right? ...anybody knows him?
(MORE)

FRAGMENTED VOICES (cont'd)
...look at his eyes! ...Somebody,
call a doctor!..

TALL MAN IN UNIFORM

(peremptorily)

Break up, break up! Nothing to look
at! Please break up!

He turns to the just appeared on scene old bearded man
wearing old-fashioned golden glasses

TALL MAN IN UNIFORM

Are you a doctor?

MAN WEARING GLASSES

Well, well... Not exactly, but
close enough...

(he looks at the POV
character, investigating
his eye's pupils)

...Aaw, the capillaries are blown!
It must be the sunstroke; we need
to move him in the shadow as soon
as possible!

The world stops after this phrase. We see some distorted
faces, a buzzing sound once again mutes everything. The only
word that remains over chaos - is "shadow... shadow...
shadow..." heard in a deeply lowered, inhuman voice. Suddenly
the POV character loses his mind, we hear his wild,
frightening cry:

THE POV CHARACTER

No-o-o-o!!!!

He starts to stampede, hits the crowd, falls face down,
crawls for a bit, stands up and continues his crazy run until
he hits the concrete wall with his face. We see blood
covering entire screen. The POV character is dead.

EXT. PROLOGUE: ENTERTAINMENT PARK - MOMENTS LATER

We no longer use character's POV and therefore see him from the outside. He lies dead near a concrete wall, face covered with blood. Other people rush to the help, we hear woman cry.

CONTINUOUS TRANSITION TO THE LOCATED NEARBY ENTRANCE TO THE DARK TUNNEL. THE GLITTERING SIGNBOARD OVER IT SHINES WITH THE WORD "NIGHTFALL" - THAT'S THE MOVIE'S TITLE. WE SUBMERGE INTO THE TUNNEL AND DIVE INTO THE DARKNESS.

FADE TO BLACK.

FADE TO:

EXT. OBSERVATORY'S TERRITORY - YEARS LATER

TEXT: "Cycle 9, Gamma 2049"

We look at the movie's main location from the bird-eye POV. It's an old three-stories up observatory, built like a fortress & surrounded by numerous astronomical instruments, however none of them is optical - there are no optical instruments in this world. The observatory's main dome houses not the telescope, but "solaroscope" - an instrument, that visually resembles an enormous smoked-glass prism with a number of metallic moving light filters & oculars, protected with shades.

EXT. OBSERVATORY'S TERRITORY - DAY

A car approaches an observatory's yard. The car looks like an American model from fifties, however it totally lacks any optics - instead of turn signals there are little flags, instead of taillights - rotating "revolver-type" signs. The car stops at the gates, and Taira 762 appears; she's young, effective, beautiful woman wearing jeans, her appearance is defiant & modern (compared to the usual people of that period). She kicks the gate several times.

Finally, out of observatory's doors appears Beenay 25 - a huge, tall & strongly built man, wearing photographer's vest.

BEENAY

You promised to be here at six!

TAIRA

Well, believe it or not, the world is not rotating around your place. I was busy elsewhere. How's the old man doing?

BEENAY

He... I... I haven't told him yet.

TAIRA

(smiles)

Got it. Let's go.

They enter observatory.

INT. FIRST FLOOR - CONTINUOUS

Taira & Beenay walk the well-lit stone corridor. There are tall, narrow windows on the walls, every window is protected by thick steel lattice.

INT. THE LADDER - CONTINUOUS

Beenay & Taira walk up the spiral staircase. Again, everything is well-lit, there are mirrors on the ceiling, projecting sunlight to every corner.

INT. THE MAIN LABORATORY - CONTINUOUS

The laboratory is filled with vintage-looking equipment, however none of it has any kind of lights, glowing screens or LEDs. This is critical to movie's idea; people of this world simply do not know how to produce light artificially - the only light source, known to them, is fire.

Every workplace has rotating mirror over it; at the center of the ceiling there is a huge glowing prism, connected to the sunlight with several glittering light wires. It is crucial to show, that the prism itself does not produce light - without the sun outside, it is useless. Therefore, during the continuous fading of day during the movie's progress, every light source on screen has to change its color & intensity in the very same way.

Near the most advanced piece of equipment, stands Aton 77 - director of Saro University, an old, but still gorgeously looking scientist. He's the only one wearing scientist's white robe.

As Taira & Beenay enter the lab, all start turning to them in surprise, however Aton is the last one to notice his guests.

ATON

(crossly)

Beenay, who's that young woman?

BEENAY

(with confusion in his voice)

Professor, let me introduce to you...

TAIRA

(brusquely interrupts)

Taira 762, the special correspondent of Saro's "Chronicles", at your service. I'm here to gather some material for the Sunday's issue.

(she thrusts her hand)

Aton thrusts out a belligerent lower lip and glares at the young newspaperwoman in a hot fury. In a second or two, he finds his voice, and though it trembles with restrained emotion, the careful, somewhat pedantic phraseology, for which Aton is famous, does not abandon him.

ATON

Beenay, I want this woman to leave our observatory at once.

Taira shrugs and puts her hands in her jeans pockets. Beenay timidly steps forward.

BEENAY

Professor, if only you would listen to me...

TAIRA

(joyfully)

Yeah, you should listen to your people once in a while, great idea, agree?

ATON

(not changing his voice)

Not a word, Beenay. I'll speak with you later. And as for you, young woman... You display an infernal gall in coming to me with that impudent proposition of yours!

BEENAY

(thrust a tongue's tip
across dry lips)

Now, sir, after all...

Aton abruptly turns to him:

ATON

Do not interfere, Beenay. I will credit you with good intentions in bringing this... creature here; but I will tolerate no insubordination now.

Taira decides it is time to take a part:

TAIRA

Director Aton, if you'll let me finish what I started saying, I think...

ATON

I don't believe, young lady, that anything you could say now would count much as compared with your daily columns of these last two months. You have led a vast newspaper campaign against the efforts of myself and my colleagues to organize the world against the menace which it is now too late to avert. You have done your best with your highly personal attacks to make the staff of this Observatory objects of ridicule.

The director lifts a copy of the "Saro City Chronicle" from the table and shakes it at Taira furiously:

ATON

Even a person of your well-known impudence should have hesitated before coming to me with a request that she be allowed to cover today's events for his paper. Of all newsmen, you!

TAIRA

I'm newswoman, actually.

Aton dashes the newspaper to the floor, turns to the window, and clasps his arms behind his back:

ATON

(over his shoulder)

You may leave.

He stares moodily out at the skyline, where Gamma, the brightest of the planet's six suns, is setting. It had already faded and yellowed into the horizon mists, leaving only one sun in the sky - the red dwarf Beta. Everyone in the laboratory remain silent.

ATON

No, wait, come here!

(he gestures peremptorily)

I'll give you your story.

The newswoman, who had made no motion to leave, approaches the old man slowly. Aton gestures outward:

ATON

Of the six suns, only Beta is left in the sky. Do you see it?

TAIRA

The question is rather unnecessary.

ATON

What do you know about our Universe?

TAIRA

(shrugs shoulders)

No less than any other well-educated person. The Universe is made out of six stars - Lagash's own sun, Alpha, the one that revolves about our planet, the two distant companion pairs, and the red dwarf Beta, which for the moment is undisputed ruler of Lagash's sky.

ATON

(contemptuously)

And you call yourself "a well-educated person"?! It is not the sun that revolves about Lagash, it's our planet that goes around its sun!

TAIRA

(smiles)

I've heard of that theory... As well
as of vampires & sea serpents...
They're so cute, agree!

She shows her bracelet, which resembles a snake.

TAIRA

Round and round and round! See?

Aton's upturned face flushes redly in the sunlight.

ATON

In just under four hours,
civilization, as we know it, comes to
an end. It will do so because, as you
see, Beta is the only sun in the sky.

He smiles grimly.

ATON

Print that! There will be no one to
read it.

TAIRA

(softly)

But if it turns out that four hours
pass - and another four - and nothing
happens?

ATON

Don't let that worry you. Enough will
happen.

TAIRA

Granted! And still - if nothing
happens?

For a second time, Beenay 25 spokes:

BEENAY

Sir, I think you ought to listen to her.

TAIRA

(mockingly)

Put it to a vote, Director Aton?

There is a stir among the remaining five members of the Observatory staff, who till now had maintained an attitude of wary neutrality.

ATON

(flatly)

That is not necessary.

(he draws out his pocket watch)

Since your good friend, Beenay, insists so urgently, I will give you five minutes. Talk away.

TAIRA

Good! Now, just what difference would it make if you allowed me to take down an eyewitness account of what's to come? If your prediction comes true, my presence won't hurt; for in that case my column would never be written. On the other hand, if nothing comes of it, you will just have to expect ridicule or worse. It would be wise to leave that ridicule to friendly hands, agree?

ATON

(snorts)

Do you mean yours when you speak of friendly hands?

Taira brazenly sits on a nearby table, crosses her legs:

TAIRA

Certainly! My columns may have been a little rough, but I gave you people the benefit of the doubt every time. After all, this is not the century to preach "The end of the world is at hand" to Lagash. You have to understand that people don't believe the "Book of Revelations" anymore, and it annoys them to have scientists turn about-face and tell us the Cultists are right after all...

ATON

(interrupts)

No such thing, young lady! While a great deal of our data has been supplied us by the Cult, our results contain none of the Cult's mysticism. Facts are facts, and the Cult's so-called mythology has certain facts behind it. We've exposed them and ripped away their mystery. I assure you that the Cult hates us now worse than you do.

TAIRA

I don't hate you. I'm just trying to tell you that the public is in an ugly humor. They're angry.

ATON

(twists his mouth in
derision)

Let them be angry...

TAIRA

Yes, but what about tomorrow?

ATON

There'll be no tomorrow!

TAIRA

But if there is? Say that there is...
Just to see what happens. That anger
might take shape into something
serious. After all, you know, business
has taken a nosedive these last two
months. Investors don't really believe
the world is coming to an end, but
just the same they're being cagy with
their money until it's all over.
Johnny Public doesn't believe you,
either, but the new spring furniture
might just as well wait a few
months... just to make sure. You see
the point? Just as soon as this is all
over, the business interests will be
after your hide. They'll say that if
crackpots... begging your pardon...
can upset the country's prosperity any
time they want, simply by making some
cockeyed prediction... it's up to the
planet to prevent them. The sparks
will fly, sir.

The director regards the columnist sternly.

ATON

And just what were you proposing to do
to help the situation?

TAIRA

(grins)

Well... I was proposing to take charge of the publicity. I can handle things so that only the ridiculous side will show. It would be hard to stand, I admit, because I'd have to make you all out to be a bunch of gibbering idiots, but if I can get people laughing at you, they might forget to be angry. In return for that, all my publisher asks is an exclusive story.

BEENAY

(nods & bursts out)

Sir, the rest of us think she's right. These last two months we've considered everything but the million-to-one chance that there is an error somewhere in our theory or in our calculations. We ought to take care of that, too.

There is a murmur of agreement from the men grouped about the table, and Aton's expression becomes that of one who found his mouth full of something bitter and can't get rid of it.

ATON

You may stay if you wish, then. You will kindly refrain, however, from hampering us in our duties in any way. You will also remember that I am in charge of all activities here, and in spite of your opinions as expressed in your columns, I will expect full cooperation and full respect...

His hands are behind his back, and his wrinkled face thrust forward determinedly as he speaks. He might have continued indefinitely but for the intrusion of a new voice:

SHEERIN

(enters the lab)

Hello, hello, hello!

(he smiles)

What's this morgue-like atmosphere about here? No one's losing his nerve, I hope?

ATON

(in consternation, peevishly)

Now what the Darkness are you doing here, Sheerin? I thought you were going to stay behind in the Hideout..

Sheerin laughs and drops into a chair.

SHEERIN

Hideout be blowed! The place bored me. I wanted to be here, where things are getting hot. Don't you suppose I have my share of curiosity? I want to see these Stars the Cultists are forever speaking about!

He rubs his hands and adds in a soberer tone:

SHEERIN

It's freezing outside. The wind's enough to hang icicles on your nose. Beta doesn't seem to give any heat at all, at the distance it is...

ATON

(in sudden exasperation)

Why do you go out of your way to do crazy things, Sheerin? What kind of good are you around here?!

SHEERIN

(spreading his palms in
comical resignation)

What kind of good am I around there? A psychologist isn't worth his salt in the Hideout. They need men of action and strong, healthy women that can breed children. Me? I'm a hundred years too old for a man of action, and I wouldn't be a success at breeding children. So why bother them with an extra mouth to feed? I feel better over here...

Taira takes a (paper) notebook out of her pocket and asks briskly:

TAIRA

Just what is the Hideout, sir?

Sheerin seems to see the columnist for the first time.

SHEERIN

And just who in Lagash are you, lady?

ATON

(mutters sullenly)

That's Tarta 762, the newspaper girl.
I suppose you've heard of her.

TAIRA

(trusts her hand)

And, of course, you're Sheerin 501 of Saro University. I've heard of you even more probably, than director Aton has heard of me... Still, what is this Hideout, sir?

SHEERIN

(after small hesitation)

Well.. We have managed to convince a few people of the validity of our prophecy of... er... Doom, to be spectacular about it, and those few have taken proper measures. They consist mainly of the immediate members of the families of the Observatory staff, certain of the faculty of Saro University, and a few outsiders. Altogether, they number about three hundred, but three quarters are women and children.

TAIRA

I see! They're supposed to hide where the Darkness and the... er... "Stars" can't get at them, and then hold out when the rest of the world goes poof! If they can... It won't be easy. With all of mankind insane, with the great cities going up in flames... Environment will not be conducive to survival. But they have food, water, shelter, and weapons...

ATON

They've got more. They've got all our records, except for what we will collect today. Those records will mean everything to the next cycle, and that's what must survive. The rest can go hang.

Taira utters a long, low whistle and sits brooding for several moments. The men about the table bring out a multi-chess board and start a six-member game. Moves are made rapidly and in silence. All eyes bent in furious concentration on the board. Taira watches them intently and then rises and approaches Aton, who is in whispered conversation with Sheerin.

TAIRA

Listen, let's go somewhere where we
won't bother the rest of the fellows.
I want to ask some questions.

The aged astronomer frowns sourly at him, but Sheerin chirps up:

SHEERIN

Certainly. It will do me good to talk.
It always does. Aton was telling me
about your ideas concerning world
reaction to a failure of the
prediction... and I agree with you. I
read your column pretty regularly, by
the way, and as a general thing I like
your views.

ATON

(growls)

Please, Sheerin!

SHEERIN

Eh? Oh, all right. We'll go into the
next room. It has softer chairs,
anyway...

CUT TO:

EXT. SUBURBS - EVENING

We see Saro City suburbs. It's a poor area, there are no large buildings here. The only one, that stands out, looks like gray concrete cube surrounded with grille fence. Like every building on this planet, "the cube" has big windows, but unlike any other place, here they are boarded up. On the roof we see a man standing; it's Faro, one of the Observatory's scientists. He stares at the sky, where there's currently only one sun shining - the red dwarf Beta.

Behind Faro a hatch in the roof opens. A man, looking a lot like Faro, appears from the hatchway, his clothes covered with sawdust and dirt. It's Yimot - Faro's brother. Tired and exhausted, he sits at the edge of a hatchway.

YIMOT

I'm starting to doubt that our idea was any good. Stairs... On the way up...

(he shivers)

FARO

(over his shoulder)

It's dark?

YIMOT

Dark...

(he breathes deeply)

Oh, if the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore, and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God!

FARO

You still remember that?!

YIMOT

(nervously)

Those fairy tales of our nurse are hard to kick out of one's head, you know...

FARO

Yeah, she was... different. I'll never forget the day when you got yourself stuck in a chest, crying like a wild piglet, and she rushed for help with that giant knife of hers! Remember how she started piercing the lid of the chest?

YIMOT

(shivers)

No... I remember nothing of that day. Mom said, it took doctors a whole nine hours to bring me back to life, is that true?

FARO

May be, may be... I'm not very fond of that day ether, you know.

He turns around and looks at the roof. We see, that it is covered with checkerboard-scattered bits of staggered tubes. Faro gives Yimot one long stare.

FARO

It's time, brother. We can't wait any longer.

(He looks at the sky)

Dark soon.

CUT TO:

INT. OBSERVATORY, NEXT ROOM - LATER

There are soft chairs in this room. There are also thick red curtains on the windows and a maroon carpet on the floor. With the bricky light of Beta pouring in, the general effect is one of dried blood.

TAIRA

(shudders)

Say, I'd give ten credits for a decent dose of white light for just a second. I wish Gamma or Delta were in the sky...

ATON

What are your questions? Please remember that our time is limited. In a little over an hour and a quarter we're going upstairs, and after that there will be no time for talk.

Taira leans back and folds her hands on her chest.

TAIRA

Well, here it is. You people seem so all-fired serious about this that I'm beginning to believe you. Would you mind explaining what it's all about?

ATON

(explodes)

Do you mean to sit there and tell me that you've been bombarding us with ridicule without even finding out what we've been trying to say?!

TAIRA

(grins sheepishly)

It's not that bad, sir. I've got the general idea. You say there is going to be a world-wide Darkness in a few hours and that all mankind will go violently insane. What I want now is the science behind it.

SHEERIN

(breaks in)

No, you don't. No, you don't. If you ask Aton for that... Supposing him to be in the mood to answer at all... He'll trot out pages of figures and volumes of graphs. You won't make head or tail of it. Now if you were to ask me, I could give you the layman's standpoint.

TAIRA

All right; I ask you.

SHEERIN

Then first I'd like a drink.

He rubs his hands and looks at Aton.

ATON

(grunts)

Water?

SHEERIN

Don't be silly!

ATON

Don't you be silly. No alcohol today. It would be too easy to get my men drunk. I can't afford to tempt them.

The psychologist grumbles wordlessly. He turns to Taira, impaling her with his sharp eyes, and begins:

SHEERIN

You realize, of course, that the history of civilization on Lagash displays a cyclic character... But I mean cyclic!

TAIRA

(cautiously)

I know, that that's the current archaeological theory. Has it been accepted as a fact?

SHEERIN

Just about. In this last century it's been generally agreed upon. This cyclic character is... Or rather, was... One of the great mysteries. We've located series of civilizations, nine of them definitely, and indications of others as well, all of which have reached heights comparable to our own, and all of which, without exception, were destroyed by fire at the very height of their culture. And no one could tell why. All centers of culture were thoroughly gutted by fire, with nothing left behind to give a hint as to the cause.

TAIRA

Wasn't there a Stone Age, too?

SHEERIN

Probably, but as yet practically nothing is known of it, except that men of that age were little more than rather intelligent apes. We can forget about that.

TAIRA

I see. Go on!

SHEERIN

There have been explanations of these recurrent catastrophes, all of a more or less fantastic nature. Some say that there are periodic rains of fire; some that Lagash passes through a sun every so often; some even wilder things. But there is one theory, quite different from all of these, that has been handed down over a period of centuries.

TAIRA

I know. You mean this myth of the "Stars" that the Cultists have in their "Book of Revelations"

SHEERIN

(with satisfaction)

Exactly. The Cultists said that every two thousand and fifty years Lagash entered a huge cave, so that all the suns disappeared, and there came total darkness all over the world! And then, they say, things called "Stars" appeared, which robbed men of their souls and left them unreasoning brutes, so that they destroyed the civilization they themselves had built up. Of course they mix all this up with a lot of religio-mystic notions, but that's the central idea.

There is a short pause in which Sheerin draws a long breath.

SHEERIN

And now we come to the Theory of Universal Gravitation.

He pronounces the phrase so that the capital letters sound... And at that point Aton turns from the window, snorts loudly, and stalks out of the room.

TAIRA

What's wrong?

SHEERIN

Nothing in particular. Two of the men were due several hours ago and haven't shown up yet. He's terrifically short-handed, of course, because all but the really essential men have gone to the Hideout.

TAIRA

You don't think the two deserted, do you?

SHEERIN

Who? Faro and Yimot? Of course not. Still, if they're not back within the hour, things would be a little sticky....

He gets to his feet suddenly, and his eyes twinkle.

SHEERIN

Anyway, as long as Aton is gone...

Tiptoeing to the nearest window, he squats, and from the low window box beneath withdraws a bottle of red liquid that gurgled suggestively when he shakes it.

SHEERIN

I thought Aton didn't know about this. Here! We've only got one glass so, as lady, you can have it. I'll keep the bottle.

(he fills the tiny cup with
judicious care)

Taira rises to protest, but Sheerin eyes her sternly.

SHEERIN

Respect your elders, young lady.

The newswoman seats herself with a look of anguish on her face.

TAIRA

Go ahead, then, you old villain.

The psychologist's Adam's apple wobbles as the bottle upends, and then, with a satisfied grunt and a smack of the lips, he begins again:

SHEERIN

But what do you know about gravitation?

TAIRA

Nothing, except that it is a very recent development, not too well established, and that the math is so hard that only twelve men in Lagash are supposed to understand it.

SHEERIN

Tcha! Nonsense! Baloney! I can give you all the essential math in a sentence. The Law of Universal Gravitation states that there exists a cohesive force among all bodies of the universe, such that the amount of this force between any two given bodies is proportional to the product of their masses divided by the square of the distance between them.

TAIRA

(mockingly)

Is that all?

SHEERIN

That's enough! It took four hundred years to develop it.

TAIRA

Why that long? It sounded simple enough, the way you said it. Like if my cat could have understood it... If only I had a cat.

SHEERIN

Because great laws are not divined by flashes of inspiration, whatever you may think. It usually takes the combined work of a world full of scientists over a period of centuries. After Genovi 41 discovered that Lagash rotated about the sun Alpha rather than vice versa - and that was four hundred years ago - astronomers have been working. The complex motions of the six suns were recorded and analyzed and unwoven. Theory after theory was advanced and checked and counter-checked and modified and abandoned and revived and converted to something else. It was a Darkness of a job!

Taira nods thoughtfully and hold out her glass for more liquor. Sheerin grudgingly allows a few ruby drops to leave the bottle.

SHEERIN

(continues after
remoistening his own
throat)

It was twenty years ago, that it was finally demonstrated that the Law of Universal Gravitation accounted exactly for the orbital motions of the six suns. It was a great triumph.

Sheerin stands up and walks to the window, still clutching his bottle.

SHEERIN

And now we're getting to the point. In the last decade, the motions of Lagash about Alpha were computed according to gravity, and if did not account for the orbit observed not even when all perturbations due to the other suns were included. Either the law was invalid, or there was another, as yet unknown, factor involved.

Taira joins Sheerin at the window and gazes out past the wooded slopes to where the spires of Saro City gleam bloodily on the horizon. The newswoman feels the tension of uncertainty grow within her as she cast a short glance at Beta. It glow redly at zenith, dwarfed and evil.

TAIRA

(softly)

Go ahead, sir

SHEERIN

Astronomers stumbled about for year, each proposed theory more untenable than the one before... Until Aton had the inspiration of calling in the Cult. The head of the Cult, Sor 5, had access to certain data that simplified the problem considerably. Aton set to work on a new track. What if there were another nonluminous planetary body such as Lagash? If there were, you know, it would shine only by reflected light, and if it were composed of bluish rock, as Lagash itself largely is, then, in the redness of the sky, the eternal blaze of the suns would make it invisible - drown it out completely.

TAIRA

(whistles)

What a screwy idea!

SHEERIN

You think that's screwy? Listen to this: Suppose this body rotated about Lagash at such a distance and in such an orbit and had such a mass that its attraction would exactly account for the deviations of Lagash's orbit from theory - do you know what would happen?

The columnist shakes her head.

SHEERIN

Well, sometimes this body would get in the way of a sun!

(he empties what remained in the bottle at a draft)

TAIRA

(flatly)

And it does, I suppose.

SHEERIN

Yes! But only one sun lies in its plane of revolution -

(He jerks a thumb at the shrunken sun above)

- Beta! And it has been shown that the eclipse will occur only when the arrangement of the suns is such that Beta is alone in its hemisphere and at maximum distance, at which time the moon is invariably at minimum distance.

(MORE)

SHEERIN (cont'd)

The eclipse that results, with the moon seven times the apparent diameter of Beta, covers all of Lagash and lasts well over half a day, so that no spot on the planet escapes the effects. That eclipse comes once every two thousand and forty-nine years!

Taira's face is drawn into an expressionless mask.

TAIRA

And that's my story?

SHEERIN

(nods)

That's all of it. First the eclipse - which will start in three quarters of an hour - then universal Darkness and, maybe, these mysterious "Stars" - then madness, and end of the cycle.

Sheerin looks at the window. For a moment nobody speaks.

SHEERIN

We had two months' leeway - we at the Observatory - and that wasn't enough time to persuade Lagash of the danger. Two centuries might not have been enough. But our records are at the Hideout, and today we photograph the eclipse. The next cycle will start off with the truth, and when the next eclipse comes, mankind will at last be ready for it. Come to think of it, that's part of your story too.

A thin wind ruffles the curtains at the window as Taira opens it and leans out. It plays coldly with her hair as she stares at the crimson sunlight on her hand. Then she turns in sudden rebellion:

TAIRA

What is there in Darkness to drive me
mad?!

Sheerin smiles to himself as he spins the empty liquor bottle
with abstracted motions of his hand.

SHEERIN

Have you ever experienced Darkness,
young lady?

The newswoman leans against the wall and considers.

TAIRA

No. Can't say I have. But I know what
it is. Just... uh...

(she makes vague motions
with her fingers and then
brightens)

Just no light. Like in caves!

SHEERIN

Have you ever been in a cave?

TAIRA

In a cave?! Of course not!

SHEERIN

I thought not. I tried last week -
just to see - but I got out in a
hurry. I went in until the mouth of
the cave was just visible as a blur of
light, with black everywhere else. I
never thought a person my age could
run that fast.

TAIRA

(curls lips)

Well, if it comes to that, I guess I
wouldn't have run if I had been there.

The psychologist studies the young woman with an annoyed frown.

SHEERIN

My, don't you talk big! I dare you to
draw the curtain.

TAIRA

(after a short hesitation,
nervously)

What for? If we had four or five suns
out there, we might want to cut the
light down a bit for comfort, but now
we haven't enough light as it is.

SHEERIN

That's the point. Just draw the
curtain; then come here and sit down.

TAIRA

All right...

She reaches for the tasseled string and jerks. The red curtain
slides across the wide window, the brass rings hissing their
way along the crossbar, and a dusk-red shadow clamps down on
the room. Taira's footsteps sound hollowly in the silence as
she makes her way to the table, and then they stop halfway.

TAIRA

(whispers)

I can't see you, sir.

SHEERIN

(in a strained voice)

Feel your way.

TAIRA

(breathing harshly)

But I can't see you, sir. I can't see anything.

SHEERIN

(grimly)

What did you expect? Come here and sit down!

The footsteps sound again, waveringly, approaching slowly. There is the sound of someone fumbling with a chair. Taira's voice coming thinly.

TAIRA

Here I am. I feel ... ulp ... all right...

SHEERIN

You like it, do you?

TAIRA

N-no. It's pretty awful. The walls seem to be... They seem to be closing in on me. I keep wanting to push them away. But I'm not going mad! In fact, the feeling isn't as bad as it was.

SHEERIN

All right. Draw the curtain back again.

There are cautious footsteps through the dark, the rustle of Taira's body against the curtain as she feels for the tassel, and then the triumphant roo-osh of the curtain slithering back. Red light floods the room, and with a cry of joy Taira looks up at the sun. Sheerin wipes the moistness off his forehead with the back of a hand and says shakily:

SHEERIN

(shakily)

And that was just a dark room.

TAIRA

(lightly)

It can be stood.

SHEERIN

Yes, a dark room can. But were you at the Jonglor Centennial Exposition two years ago?

TAIRA

No, it so happens I never got around to it. Six thousand miles was just a bit too much to travel, even for the exposition.

SHEERIN

Well, I was there...

He pauses for a bit, looking at the window. The scene fades out to flashback, with conversation continuing as voice-over.

FADE OUT.

FADE TO:

EXT. FLASHBACK - ENTERTAINMENT PARK - DAY

We return to the park from the movie's prologue. This time everything is shown as vintage chronicle, including cuts from local newspapers & newsflashes. Sheerin's and Taira's conversation continue in the background, with corresponding images accompanying voices.

SHEERIN (VOICE OVER)

You remember hearing about the "Tunnel of Mystery" that broke all records in the amusement area... for the first month or so, anyway?

TAIRA (VOICE OVER)

Yes. Wasn't there some fuss about it?

SHEERIN (VOICE OVER)

Very little. It was hushed up. You see, that Tunnel of Mystery was just a mile-long tunnel - with no lights. You got into a little open car and jolted along through Darkness for fifteen minutes. It was very popular, while it lasted.

TAIRA (VOICE OVER)

Popular?

SHEERIN (VOICE OVER)

Certainly. There's a fascination in being frightened when it's part of a game. A baby is born with three instinctive fears: of loud noises, of falling, and of the absence of light. That's why it's considered so funny to jump at someone and shout "Boo!" That's why it's such fun to ride a roller coaster. And that's why that Tunnel of Mystery started cleaning up.

(MORE)

SHEERIN (VOICE OVER) (cont'd)

People came out of that Darkness shaking, breathless, half dead with fear, but they kept on paying to get in.

TAIRA (VOICE OVER)

Wait a while, I remember now. Some people came out dead, didn't they? There were rumors of that after it shut down.

SHEERIN (VOICE OVER)

Bah! Two or three died. That was nothing! They paid off the families of the dead ones and argued the Jonglor City Council into forgetting it. After all, they said, if people with weak hearts want to go through the tunnel, it was at their own risk - and besides, it wouldn't happen again. So they put a doctor in the front office and had every customer go through a physical examination before getting into the car. That actually boosted ticket sales.

TAIRA (VOICE OVER)

Unbelievable! Well, then?

SHEERIN (VOICE OVER)

But you see, there was something else. People sometimes came out in perfect order, except that they refused to go into buildings - any buildings; including palaces, mansions, apartment houses, tenements, cottages, huts, shacks, lean-tos, and tents.

TAIRA (VOICE OVER)

(shoked)

You mean they refused to come in
out of the open? Where'd they sleep?

SHEERIN (VOICE OVER)

In the open.

TAIRA (VOICE OVER)

They should have forced them inside.

SHEERIN (VOICE OVER)

Oh, they did, they did. Whereupon
these people went into violent
hysterics and did their best to bat
their brains out against the
nearest wall. Once you got them
inside, you couldn't keep them
there without a strait jacket or a
heavy dose of tranquilizer.

TAIRA (VOICE OVER)

They must have been crazy!

SHEERIN (VOICE OVER)

Which is exactly what they were. One
person out of every ten who went into
that tunnel came out that way. They
called in the psychologists, and we
did the only thing possible. We closed
down the exhibit.

TAIRA (VOICE OVER)

What was the matter with these people?

SHEERIN (VOICE OVER)

Essentially the same thing that was the matter with you when you thought the walls of the room were crushing in on you in the dark. There is a psychological term for mankind's instinctive fear of the absence of light. We call it "claustrophobia", because the lack of light is always tied up with enclosed places, so that fear of one is fear of the other. You see?

TAIRA (VOICE OVER)

And those people of the tunnel?

SHEERIN (VOICE OVER)

Those people of the tunnel consisted of those unfortunates whose mentality did not quite possess the resiliency to overcome the claustrophobia that overtook them in the Darkness. Fifteen minutes without light is a long time; you only had two or three minutes, and I believe you were fairly upset... The people of the tunnel had what is called a "claustrophobic fixation". Their latent fear of Darkness and enclosed places had crystallized and become active, and, as far as we can tell, permanent. That's what fifteen minutes in the dark will do.

FADE OUT.

FADE TO:

INT. OBSERVATORY, NEXT ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

The flashback dissolves, leaving us with Sheerin & Taira back at their room, only the sun outside has become even dimmer. There is a long silence, and Taira's forehead wrinkles slowly into a frown.

TAIRA

I don't believe it's that bad.

SHEERIN

You mean you don't want to believe.
You're afraid to believe. Look out the
window!

(Taira does so, and the
psychologist continues
without pausing)

Imagine Darkness - everywhere! No
light, as far as you can see. The
houses, the trees, the fields, the
earth, the sky - black! And Stars
thrown in, for all I know - whatever
they are. Can you conceive it?!

TAIRA

(truculently)

Yes, I can!

Sheerin slams his fist down upon the table in sudden passion^

SHEERIN

You lie! You can't conceive that. Your
brain wasn't built for the conception
any more than it was built for the
conception of infinity or of eternity.
You can only talk about it. A fraction
of the reality upsets you, and when
the real thing comes, your brain is
going to be presented with the
phenomenon outside its limits of
comprehension. You will go mad,
completely and permanently! There is
no question of it!

(he adds sadly)

(MORE)

SHEERIN (cont'd)

And another couple of millennia of painful struggle comes to nothing. Tomorrow there won't be a city standing unharmed in all Lagash.

TAIRA

(recovering part of her mental equilibrium)

That doesn't follow. I still don't see that I can go loony just because there isn't a sun in the sky - but even if I did, and everyone else did, how does that harm the cities? Are we going to blow them down?

Sheerin is angry.

SHEERIN

If you were in Darkness, what would you want more than anything else; what would it be that every instinct would call for? Light, damn you, light!

TAIRA

Well?

SHEERIN

And how would you get light?

TAIRA

(flatly)

I don't know.

SHEERIN

What's the only way to get light, short of a sun?

TAIRA

How should I know?

They are standing face to face and nose to nose.

SHEERIN

You burn something, my lady. Ever see a forest fire? Ever go camping and cook a stew over a wood fire? Heat isn't the only thing burning wood gives off, you know. It gives off light, and people know that. And when it's dark they want light, and they're going to get it.

TAIRA

So they burn wood?

SHEERIN

So they burn whatever they can get!!! They've got to have light. They've got to burn something, and wood isn't handy - so they'll burn whatever is nearest. They'll have their light, and every center of habitation goes up in flames!

Eyes held each other as though the whole matter is a personal affair of respective will powers, and then Taira breaks away wordlessly.

CUT TO:

EXT. SUBURBS - EVENING

We're back at the "concrete cube" building. A pickup truck stops near the closed gates, and a number of powerfully built men jump out. They're armed with sticks and clubs. Out of the cabin appears Latimer - wearing the Cultist's dark robe decorated with small silver stars. He approaches the gate and knocks violently.

LATIMER

(loudly)

Open up! We know you're there!

A rusty door opens in the building. Squinting and shielding his eyes, pale Yimot comes out to the light - he's all covered in sweat, shirt soaking wet, eyes full of horror. At the sight of the flaming sky, he can hardly suppress a jubilant shout, and leans against the wall with such a relief, that does not even respond to the cries of the cultist.

LATIMER

Hey! You! Open the gate at once!

Yimot, wiping the sweat from his brow, finally comes to his senses and turns to the visitors.

YIMOT

Ex... excuse me? Who are you?

LATIMER

None of your damn business, wicked!
Open the gate before we break in!
We know everything about your vile
actions!

One of Latimer's men strikes the grill fence with his club. Yimot looks frightened.

YIMOT

This building is our property, you
have no right being here & acting
like that! I will report your...

LATIMER

(interrupts)

Everything belongs to the Stars!
(MORE)

LATIMER (cont'd)
(he turns to his men)

Break in!

Yimot cries and rushes behind the door. Men with clubs start hitting the gate & grill fence around it.

INT. CONCRETE BUILDING'S INTERIOR - CONTINUOUS

Yimot enters huge dark room and pushes the trigger near the door. All windows open with mechanical noises, red light from the outside fills the room. At its center Faro lies unconsciousness, he's just as pale & covered in sweat as Yimot was a moment ago.

YIMOT

(falls to his knees near
his brother)

Faro! Wake up! Wake up!

Faro opens his eyes - they're bloodshot. Yimot helps him stand up.

FARO

(shivers)

Is... Is it done now? Is the
experiment over?

YIMOT

(frightened)

Cultists are here! We have to run!

A strong metallic sound is heard from outside, as Latimer's men start breaking the door. Yimot & Faro, helping each other to walk, rush to another exit.

EXT. CONCRETE BUILDING'S BACKYARD - MOMENTS LATER

Faro's small cheap car is parked outside. When brothers reach it, Faro stops with a frightened look on his face.

FARO

I can't. I am dizzy, I can't!

YIMOT

(nervously)

I'll drive. Hurry up!

They get in the car, but are spotted by one of fanatics.

FANATIC

Hey! Hey, guys! They're here!!!

He rushes to the car hoping to intercept it, but Yimot manages to start the engine at the very last moment. Latimer's pickup truck appears in clouds of dust, fanatic jumps in without it stopping. A car chase begins.

EXT. CAR CHASE - CONTINUOUS

Car chase continues along the streets of Saro city. We see a lot of frightened, disturbed people, some gathered in groups and all looking at the sky.

After some moments of chasing, Yimot drives to one of the larger streets, where there is a police car present. Pursuers back down, aware that despite the approaching catastrophe, their actions will find little understanding with law enforcement's officers.

EXT. CITY STREET - CONTINUOUS

Yimot & Faro stop their car next to the police vehicle and wait, hearts wildly beating, until the pursuer's pickup passes by. Fanatics look at them with hate, but policemen are armed, so Latimer orders his driver not to stop.

LATIMER

(to his men)

We catch them later...
(MORE)

LATIMER (cont'd)
Right now I've got more important
mission to attend to. Take me to
those vermin's main nest!

LATIMER'S DRIVER

(respectfully)

Should we go with you, brother?

LATIMER

(coldly)

No. You must return to the city and
start gathering people. You know
what to do.

LATIMER'S DRIVER

(grimly)

Yes, brother. We know.

The pickup truck leaves. One of the policemen approaches
Faro's car, where frightened scientists continue to sit
silently.

POLICEMAN

(with sore voice)

You all right?

YIMOT

(breathes heavily)

Why haven't you arrested them?

POLICEMAN

(with a bitter smile)

Arrest a cultist? Today? No
kidding? Wanna start a riot?

YIMOT

(with rage)

But they were trying to kill us!
Are we still in a capital city, or
has all these...

(he gestures at
surroundings)

...transformed into a jungle
somehow?!

POLICEMAN

(shrugs his shoulders)

It's always been a jungle if you
ask me. Wanna good advice? Go home
and stay there for at least two
days, until this madhouse calms
down a bit.

YIMOT

(echoes)

Madhouse...

POLICEMAN

(turns to leave)

Yep.

The policeman leaves to his car. Yimot looks at Faro.

FARO

Are those fanatics really gone?

YIMOT

I hope so...

FARO

Don't like it, bro. Not one bit.

Yimot starts the engine.

YIMOT

(grimly)

Yes, it doesn't look good, bro...
Beta's still shining, but people
are already losing their minds. I'm
afraid for the Hideout...

FARO

(nervously)

Don't be! It's built like a
fortress! The mob will never have
time to storm it before... Before...

YIMOT

...the End?

FARO

It does sound silly, isn't it.

YIMOT

(after small pause)

Not today, bro. Not today.

He starts driving towards the Observatory.

CUT TO:

INT. OBSERVATORY, NEXT ROOM - LATER

Taira's still standing near the window, cold wind in her hair. The sky is almost dark red now. Suddenly a loud noise is heard from the next room, as well as new voices. Taira turns around.

TAIRA

What's happening?

SHEERIN

(amazedly)

I think I hear Yimot's voice! He and Faro are probably back. Let's go in and see what kept them!

TAIRA

(mutters)

Might as well...

She draws a long breath and seems to shake herself. The tension is broken.

INT. THE MAIN LABORATORY - CONTINUOUS

The room is in an uproar, with members of the staff clustering about two young men who are removing outer garments even as they parried the miscellany of questions being thrown at them. Aton hustles through the crowd and faces the newcomers angrily.

ATON

Faro, Yimot! Do you realize that it's less than half an hour before deadline? Where have you two been?!

Yimot seats himself and rubs his hands. His cheeks are red with the outdoor chill.

YIMOT

Don't ask...

FARO

Yimot and I have just finished carrying through a little crazy experiment of our own. We've been trying to see if we couldn't construct an arrangement by which we could simulate the appearance of Darkness and Stars so as to get an advance notion as to how it looked.

There's a confused murmur from the listeners, and a sudden look of interest enters Aton's eyes.

ATON

There wasn't anything said of this before. How did you go about it?

FARO

Well... the idea came to Yimot and myself long ago, and we've been working it out in our spare time. Yimot knew of a concrete cube-shaped house down in the city with a flat roof - it had once been used as a storage, I think. Anyway, we bought it...

ATON

(interrupts peremptorily)

Where did you get the money?

YIMOT

(grunts)

Our bank accounts. It cost two thousand credits.

(defensively)

Well, what of it?
(MORE)

YIMOT (cont'd)

Tomorrow, two thousand credits will
be two thousand pieces of paper.
That's all.

FARO

(nods)

Sure. We bought the place and rigged
it up with black velvet from top to
bottom so as to get as perfect a
Darkness as possible. Then we punched
tiny holes in the ceiling and through
the roof and covered them with little
metal caps, all of which could be
shoved aside simultaneously at the
close of a switch. At least we didn't
do that part ourselves; we got a
carpenter and an electrician and some
others - money
didn't count. The point was that we
could get the light to shine through
those holes in the roof, so that we
could get a starlike effect.

Not a breath is drawn during the pause that follows.

ATON

(stiffly)

You had no right to make a private...

FARO

(interrupts)

I know, sir - but frankly, Yimot and I
thought the experiment was a little
dangerous. If the effect really
worked, we half expected to go mad -
from what Sheerin says about all this,
we thought that would be rather
likely. We wanted to take the risk
ourselves.

(MORE)

FARO (cont'd)

Of course if we found we could retain sanity, it occurred to us that we might develop immunity to the real thing, and then expose the rest of you the same way. But things didn't work out at all...

ATON

Why, what happened?

YIMOT

We shut ourselves in and allowed our eyes to get accustomed to the dark. It's an extremely creepy feeling because the total Darkness makes you feel as if the walls and ceiling are crushing in on you. But we got over that and pulled the switch. The caps fell away and the roof glittered all over with little dots of light...

ATON

Well?!

YIMOT

Well... Nothing. That was the whacky part of it. Nothing happened. It was just a roof with holes in it, and that's just what it looked like. There just isn't any effect at all.

There follows a shocked silence, and all eyes turn to Sheerin, who sits motionless, mouth open. Taira is the first to speak.

TAIRA

(grinning with relief)

You know what this does to this whole theory you've built up, Sheerin, don't you?

Sheerin raises his hand:

SHEERIN

Now wait a while. Just let me think
this through.

(he snaps his fingers, and
when he lifts his head
there's neither surprise
nor uncertainty in his eyes)

Of course!..

He never finishes. From somewhere up above there sounds a sharp
clang. Beenay, starting to his feet, dashes up the stairs.

BEENAY

What the darkness?!

The rest follow after.

INT. OBSERVATORY'S DOME - CONTINUOUS

Things happen quickly. Once up in the dome, Beenay casts one
horrified glance at the shattered photographic plates and at
the man bending over them; and then hurls himself fiercely at
the intruder, getting a death grip on his throat. There is a
wild threshing, and as others of the staff join in, the
stranger is swallowed up and smothered under the weight of half
a dozen angry men. Aton comes up last, breathing heavily.

ATON

Let him up!

There is a reluctant unscrambling and the stranger, panting
harshly, with his clothes torn and his forehead bruised, is
hauled to his feet. He has a short yellow beard curled
elaborately in the style affected by the Cultists.

FARO

That's the one who's attacked our
test site in the city!

YIMOT

And kept us so late. Be careful,
Beenay, his a damn fanatic!

Beenay shifts his hold to a collar grip and shakes the man savagely.

BEENAY

All right, rat, what's the idea? These plates...

LATIMER

(coldly)

I wasn't after them. That was an accident.

Beenay follows his glowering stare and snarles:

BEENAY

I see. You were after the cameras themselves. The accident with the plates was a stroke of luck for you, then. If you had touched Snapping Bertha or any of the others, you would have died by slow torture. As it is...

He draws his fist back, but Aton grabbs his sleeve.

ATON

Stop that! Let him go!

The huge technician wavers, and his arm drops reluctantly. Aton pushes him aside and confronts the Cultist.

ATON

You're Latimer, aren't you?

The Cultist bows stiffly and indicates the symbol upon his hip.

LATIMER

I am Latimer 25, adjutant of the third class to his serenity, Sor 5.

ATON

(with eyebrows lifted)

And you were with his serenity when he visited me last week, weren't you?

Latimer bows a second time.

ATON

Now, then, what do you want?

LATIMER

Nothing that you would give me of your own free will.

ATON

Sor 5 sent you, I suppose... Or is this your own idea?

LATIMER

I won't answer that question.

ATON

Will there be any further visitors?

LATIMER

I won't answer that, either.

Aton glances at his timepiece and scowls.

ATON

Now, man, what is it your master wants of me? I have fulfilled my end of the bargain.

Latimer smiles faintly, but says nothing.

ATON

(angrily)

I asked him for data only the Cult could supply, and it was given to me. For that, thank you. In return I promised to prove the essential truth of the creed of the Cult.

LATIMER

(proudly)

There was no need to prove that. It stands proven by the "Book of Revelations"!

ATON

For the handful that constitute the Cult, yes. Don't pretend to mistake my meaning. I offered to present scientific backing for your beliefs. And I did!

The Cultist's eyes narrow bitterly.

LATIMER

Yes, you did - with a fox's subtlety, for your pretended explanation backed our beliefs, and at the same time removed all necessity for them. You made of the Darkness and of the Stars a natural phenomenon and removed all its real significance. That was blasphemy.

ATON

If so, the fault isn't mine. The facts exist. What can I do but state them?

LATIMER

Your "facts" are a fraud and a delusion.

ATON

(stamps angrily)

How do you know?

LATIMER

(fanatically)

I know!

The director purples and Beenay whispers urgently. Aton waves him silent.

ATON

And what does Sor 5 want us to do? He still thinks. I suppose, that in trying to warn the world to take measures against the menace of madness, we are placing innumerable souls in jeopardy. We aren't succeeding, if that means anything to him.

LATIMER

The attempt itself has done harm enough, and your vicious effort to gain information by means of your darkish instruments must be stopped. We obey the will of the Stars, and I only regret that my clumsiness prevented me from wrecking your infernal devices.

ATON

It wouldn't have done you too much good.

(MORE)

ATON (cont'd)

All our data, except for the direct evidence we intend collecting right now, is already safely cached and well beyond possibility of harm. But that does not affect your present status as an attempted burglar and criminal.

(Aton turns to the men
behind him)

Someone call the police at Saro City.

SHEERIN

(with cry of distaste)

Damn it, Aton, what's wrong with you?
There's no time for that. Here...

(he hustles his way forward)

...let me handle this.

Aton stares down his nose at the psychologist.

ATON

This is not the time for your
monkeyshines, Sheerin. Will you please
let me handle this my own way? Right
now you are a complete outsider here,
and don't forget it.

Sheerin's mouth twists eloquently.

SHEERIN

Now why should we go to the
impossible trouble of calling the
police - with Beta's eclipse a
matter of minutes from now - when
this young man here is perfectly
willing to pledge his word of honor
to remain and cause no trouble
whatsoever?

LATIMER

(promptly)

I will do no such thing. You're free to do what you want, but it's only fair to warn you that just as soon as I get my chance I'm going to finish what I came out here to do. If it's my word of honor you're relying on, you'd better call the police.

SHEERIN

(smiling in a friendly fashion)

You're a determined cuss, aren't you? Well, I'll explain something. Do you see that young man at the window?

He points out at Beenay, who stands at the nearest window and with an expression of unspeakable horror looks at the sky.

SHEERIN

(continues)

He's a strong, husky fellow, quite handy with his fists, and he's in love with his cameras besides. Once the eclipse starts there will be nothing more important to him than keeping the equipment safe - and he will kill you if needed. Besides him, there will be myself - a little too old for active fisticuffs, but still able to help.

LATIMER

(frozenly)

Well, what of it?

SHEERIN

Listen and I'll tell you. Just as soon as the eclipse starts, we're going to take you, Beenay and I, and deposit you in a little dark closet with one door, to which is attached one giant lock and no windows. You will remain there for the duration.

LATIMER

(breathes fiercely)

And afterward, there'll be no one to let me out. I know as well as you do what the coming of the Stars means - I know it far better than you. With all your minds gone, you are not likely to free me. Suffocation or slow starvation, is it? About what I might have expected from a group of scientists. But I don't give my word. It's a matter of principle, and I won't discuss it further.

Aton seems perturbed. His faded eyes are troubled.

ATON

Really, Sheerin, locking him in a dark place...

Sheerin motions him impatiently to silence.

SHEERIN

Please! I don't think for a moment things will go that far. Latimer has just tried a clever little bluff, but I'm not a psychologist just because I like the sound of the word.

(He grins at the Cultist)
(MORE)

SHEERIN (cont'd)

Come now, you don't really think I'm trying anything as crude as slow starvation. My dear Latimer, if I lock you in the closet, you are not going to see the Darkness, and you are not going to see the Stars. It does not take much knowledge of the fundamental creed of the Cult to realize that for you to be hidden from the Stars when they appear means the loss of your immortal soul. Now, I believe you to be an honorable man. I'll accept your word of honor to make no further effort to disrupt proceedings, if you'll offer it.

A vein throbs in Latimer's temple, and he seems to shrink within himself as he says thickly:

LATIMER

You have it!

(adds with swift fury)

But it is my consolation that you will all be damned for your deeds of today.

He turns on his heel and stalks to the high three-legged stool by the door. Sheerin nods to Beenay, who is still standing next to a window with horrified face.

SHEERIN

Take a seat next to him, Beenay...
just as a formality. Hey, Beenay!

But the photographer doesn't move. He had gone pale to the lips.

BEENAY

(whispers)

Look at that...

The finger he points toward the sky shakes and his voice is dry and cracked. There is one simultaneous gasp as every eye follows the pointing finger and, for one breathless moment, stares frozenly. Beta is chipped on one side!

The tiny bit of encroaching blackness is perhaps the width of a fingernail, but to the staring watchers it magnifies itself into the crack of doom.

Only for a moment they watch, and after that there is a shrieking confusion that is even shorter of duration and which gives way to an orderly scurry of activity - each man at his prescribed job. At the crucial moment there is no time for emotion. The men are merely scientists with work to do. Even Aton is melted away.

Sheerin says prosaically:

SHEERIN

First contact must have been made fifteen minutes ago. A little early, but pretty good considering the uncertainties involved in the calculation.

He looks about him and then tiptoes to frightened Taira, who remains staring out the window, and drags her away gently.

SHEERIN

(whispers)

Aton is furious, so stay away. He missed first contact on account of this fuss with Latimer, and if you get in his way he'll have you thrown out the window.

Taira nods shortly and sits down. Sheerin stares in surprise at her.

SHEERIN

The Darkness, girl! You're shaking!

TAIRA

(licking dry lips)

Eh?

(tring to smile)

I don't feel very well, and that's a fact.

SHEERIN

(with eyes hardened)

You're not losing your nerve?

TAIRA

(cries)

No! Give me a chance, will you? I haven't really believed this rigmarole - not way down beneath, anyway - till just this minute. Give me a chance to get used to the idea. You've been preparing yourself for two months or more.

SHEERIN

(thoughtfully)

You're right, at that... Listen! Have you got a family - parents, husband, children?

TAIRA

(shaking her head)

You mean the Hideout, I suppose. No, you don't have to worry about that. I have a sister, but she's two thousand miles away. I don't even know her exact address.

SHEERIN

Well, then, what about yourself?
You've got time to get there, and
they're one short anyway, since I
left. After all, you're not needed
here, and you'd make a darned fine
addition...

TAIRA

(enraged)

Some healthy woman suitable for
raising children, aha? Well, get this,
mister. I'm a newspaperwoman and I've
been assigned to cover a story! I
intend covering it!

SHEERIN

(smiles faintly)

I see. Professional honor, is that it?

TAIRA

You might call it that. But, man. I'd
give my right arm for another bottle
of that sockeroo juice even half the
size of the one you bogged. If ever a
fellow needed a drink, I do...

She breaks off. Sheerin is nudging her violently.

SHEERIN

Do you hear that? Listen!

Taira follows the motion of the other's chin and stares at the
Cultist, who, oblivious to all about him, faces the window, a
look of wild elation on his face, droning to himself the while
in singsong fashion.

TAIRA

(whispers)

What's he saying?

SHEERIN

He's quoting "Book of Revelations" fifth chapter. Keep quiet and listen, I tell you.

The Cultist's voice rises in a sudden increase of fervor

LATIMER

And it came to pass that in those days the Sun, Beta, held lone vigil in the sky for ever longer periods as the revolutions passed; until such time as for full half a revolution, it alone, shrunken and cold, shone down upon Lagash. And men did assemble in the public squares and in the highways, there to debate and to marvel at the sight, for a strange depression had seized them. Their minds were troubled and their speech confused, for the souls of men awaited the coming of the Stars. And in the city of Trigon, at high noon, Vendret 2 came forth and said unto the men of Trigon, 'Lo, ye sinners! Though ye scorn the ways of righteousness, yet will the time of reckoning come. Even now the Cave approaches to swallow Lagash; yea, and all it contains. And even as he spoke the lip of the Cave of Darkness passed the edge of Beta so that to all Lagash it was hidden from sight. Loud were the cries of men as it vanished, and great the fear of soul that fell upon them.

(MORE)

LATIMER (cont'd)

It came to pass that the Darkness of the Cave fell upon Lagash, and there was no light on all the surface of Lagash. Men were even as blinded, nor could one man see his neighbor, though he felt his breath upon his face. And in this blackness there appeared the Stars, in countless numbers, and to the strains of music of such beauty that the very leaves of the trees cried out in wonder. And in that moment the souls of men departed from them, and their abandoned bodies became even as beasts; yea, even as brutes of the wild; so that through the blackened streets of the cities of Lagash they prowled with wild cries. From the Stars there then reached down the Heavenly Flame, and where it touched, the cities of Lagash flamed to utter destruction, so that of man and of the works of man nought remained. Even then..."

There is a subtle change in Latimer's tone. His eyes had not shifted, but somehow he had become aware of the absorbed attention of the other two. Easily, without pausing for breath, the timbre of his voice shifts and the syllables become more liquid. Taira, caught by surprise, stares. The words seem on the border of familiarity. There is an elusive shift in the accent, a tiny change in the vowel stress; nothing more - yet Latimer had become thoroughly unintelligible. Sheerin smiles slyly.

SHEERIN

He shifted to some old-cycle tongue, probably their traditional second cycle. That was the language in which the "Book of Revelations" was originally written, you know.

Taira shoves her chair back and brushed her hair back with hands that no longer shake.

TAIRA

It doesn't matter; I've heard enough.
I feel much better now.

SHEERIN

(amazedly)

You do?

TAIRA

I'll say I do. I had a bad case of
jitters just a while back. Listening
to you and your gravitation and seeing
that eclipse start almost finished
me. But this...

(she jerks a contemptuous
thumb at the yellow-bearded
Cultist)

...this is the sort of thing my nurse
used to tell me. I've been laughing
at that sort of thing all my life. I'm
not going to let it scare me now.

She draws a deep breath and says with a hectic gaiety:

TAIRA

But if I expect to keep on the good
side of myself. I'm going to turn my
chair away from the window.

SHEERIN

Yes, but you'd better talk lower. Aton
just lifted his head out of that box
he's got it stuck into and gave you a
look that should have killed you.

TAIRA

(makes a mouth)

I forgot about the old fellow.

With elaborate care she turns the chair from the window, casts one distasteful look over her shoulder, and says:

TAIRA

It has occurred to me that there must be considerable immunity against this Star madness.

The psychologist does not answer immediately. Beta is past its zenith now, and the square of bloody sunlight that outlines the window upon the floor had lifted into Sheerin's lap. He stares at its dusky color thoughtfully and then bents and squints into the sun itself. The chip in its side had grown to a black encroachment that covers a third of Beta.

Sheerin shudders, and when he straightens once more his florid cheeks do not contain quite as much color as they had previously. With a smile that's almost apologetic, he reverses his chair also.

SHEERIN

(ironically)

There are probably two million people in Saro City that are all trying to join the Cult at once in one gigantic revival. The Cult is in for an hour of unexampled prosperity. I trust they'll make the most of it. Now, what was it you said?

TAIRA

Just this. How did the Cultists manage to keep the "Book of Revelations" going from cycle to cycle, and how on Lagash did it get written in the first place?

(MORE)

TAIRA (cont'd)

There must have been some sort of immunity, for if everyone had gone mad, who would be left to write the book?

Sheerin stares at his questioner ruefully.

SHEERIN

Well, now, young lady, there isn't any eyewitness answer to that, but we've got a few damned good notions as to what happened. You see, there are three kinds of people who might remain relatively unaffected. First, the very few who don't see the Stars at all: the seriously retarded or those who drink themselves into a stupor at the beginning of the eclipse and remain so to the end. We leave them out - because they aren't really witnesses. Then there are children below six, to whom the world as a whole is too new and strange for them to be too frightened at Stars and Darkness. They would be just another item in an already surprising world. You see that, don't you?

Taira nods doubtfully.

TAIRA

I suppose so.

SHEERIN

Lastly, there are those whose minds are too coarsely grained to be entirely toppled. The very insensitive would be scarcely affected - oh, such people as some of our older, work broken peasants.

(MORE)

SHEERIN (cont'd)

Well, the children would have fugitive memories, and that, combined with the confused, incoherent babblings of the half-mad morons, formed the basis for the "Book of Revelations". Naturally, the book was based, in the first place, on the testimony of those least qualified to serve as historians; that is, children and morons; and was probably edited and re-edited through the cycles.

TAIRA

Do you suppose that they carried the book through the cycles the way we're planning on handing on the secret of gravitation?

SHEERIN

Perhaps, but their exact method is unimportant. They do it, somehow. The point I was getting at was that the book can't help but be a mass of distortion, even if it is based on fact. For instance, do you remember the experiment with the holes in the roof that Faro and Yimot tried the one that didn't work?

TAIRA

Yes.

SHEERIN

You know why it didn't w...

He stops and rises in alarm, for Aton is approaching, his face a twisted mask of consternation.

SHEERIN

What's happened?!

Aton draws him aside and Sheerin can feel the fingers on his elbow twitching.

ATON

(voice sounds low and
tortured)

Not so loud! I've just gotten word
from the Hideout on the private line...

SHEERIN

(brakes in anxiously)

They are in trouble?

ATON

Not they. They sealed themselves
off just a while ago, and they're
going to stay buried till day after
tomorrow. They're safe. But the
city, Sheerin... It's a shambles.
You have no idea...

(He is having difficulty
in speaking)

SHEERIN

(impatiently)

Well? What of it? It will get worse.
What are you shaking about?

(then, suspiciously)

How do you feel?

Aton's eyes sparkle angrily at the insinuation, and then fade
to anxiety once more.

ATON

You don't understand. The Cultists are
active.

(MORE)

ATON (cont'd)

They're rousing the people to storm the Observatory - promising them immediate entrance into grace, promising them salvation, promising them anything. What are we to do, Sheerin?

Sheerin's head bends, and he stares in long abstraction at his toes. He tapes his chin with one knuckle, then looks up and says crisply:

SHEERIN

Do? What is there to do? Nothing at all. Do the men know of this?

ATON

No, of course not!

SHEERIN

Good! Keep it that way. How long till totality?

ATON

Not quite an hour.

SHEERIN

There's nothing to do but gamble. It will take time to organize any really formidable mob, and it will take more time to get them out here. We're a good five miles from the city...

He glares out the window, down the slopes to where the farmed patches give way to clumps of white houses in the suburbs; down to where the metropolis itself is a blur on the horizon - a mist in the waning blaze of Beta. He repeats without turning:

SHEERIN

It will take time. Keep on working and pray that totality comes first.

Beta is cut in half, the line of division pushing a slight concavity into the still-bright portion of the Sun. It is like a gigantic eyelid shutting slantwise over the light of a world. The faint clatter of the room in which Sheerin stands fades into oblivion, and he senses only the thick silence of the fields outside. The very insects seem frightened mute. And things are dim. Sheerin jumps at the voice in his ear.

TAIRA

Is something wrong?

SHEERIN

Eh? Er... No. Get back to the chair.
We're in the way.

They slip back to their corner, but the psychologist does not speak for a time. He lifts a finger and loosens his collar. Sheerin twists his neck back and forth but finds no relief. He looks up suddenly.

SHEERIN

Are you having any difficulty in
breathing?

The newspaperwoman opens her eyes wide and draws two or three long breaths.

TAIRA

No. Why?

SHEERIN

I looked out the window too long, I
suppose. The dimness got me.
Difficulty in breathing is one of the
first symptoms of a claustrophobic
attack.

TAIRA

(draws another long breath)

Well, it hasn't got me yet. Say,
here's another of the fellows.

Beenay has interposed his bulk between the light and the pair in the corner, and Sheerin squints up at him anxiously.

SHEERIN

Hello, Beenay.

The photographer shifts his weight to the other foot and smiles feebly.

BEENAY

You won't mind if I sit down awhile
and join in the talk? My cameras are
set, and there's nothing to do till
totality.

He pauses and eyes the Cultist, who fifteen minutes earlier had drawn a small, skin-bound book from his sleeve and had been poring intently over it ever since.

BEENAY

That rat hasn't been making trouble,
has he?

Sheerin shakes his head. His shoulders are thrown back and he frown his concentration as he force himself to breathe regularly.

SHEERIN

Have you had any trouble breathing,
Beenay?

BEENAY

(sniffs the air in his turn)

It doesn't seem stuffy to me.

SHEERIN

(apologetically)

A touch of claustrophobia...

BEENAY

Ohhh! It worked itself differently with me. I get the impression that my eyes are going back on me. Things seem to blur and... Well, nothing is clear. And it's cold, too.

TAIRA

(grimaces)

Oh, it's cold, all right. That's no illusion. My toes feel as if I've been shipping them cross-country in a refrigerating car.

SHEERIN

What we need, is to keep our minds busy with extraneous affairs. I was telling you a while ago, Taira, why Faro's experiments with the holes in the roof came to nothing...

TAIRA

You were just beginning.

She encircled a knee with both arms and nuzzles her chin against it.

SHEERIN

Well, as I started to say, they were misled by taking the "Book of Revelations" literally. There probably wasn't any sense in attaching any physical significance to the Stars.

(MORE)

SHEERIN (cont'd)

It might be, you know, that in the presence of total Darkness, the mind finds it absolutely necessary to create light. This illusion of light might be all the Stars there really are.

TAIRA

In other words, you mean the Stars are the results of the madness and not one of the causes? Then, what good will Beenay's photographs be?

SHEERIN

To prove that it is an illusion, maybe; or to prove the opposite; for all I know. Then again...

Beenay draws his chair closer, and there is an expression of sudden enthusiasm on his face.

BEENAY

Say, I'm glad you two got onto this subject!

(his eyes narrow and he lifts one finger)

I've been thinking about these Stars and I've got a really cute notion. Of course it's strictly ocean foam, and I'm not trying to advance it seriously, but I think it's interesting. Do you want to hear it?

He seems half reluctant, but Sheerin leans back.

SHEERIN

Go ahead! I'm listening.

BEENAY

(bashfully)

Well, then, supposing there were other suns in the universe. I mean suns that are so far away that they're too dim to see. It sounds as if I've been reading some of that fantastic fiction, I suppose...

SHEERIN

Not necessarily. Still, isn't that possibility eliminated by the fact that, according to the Law of Gravitation, they would make themselves evident by their attractive forces?

BEENAY

Not if they were far enough off - really far off, maybe as much as four light years, or even more. We'd never be able to detect perturbations then, because they'd be too small. Say that there were a lot of suns that far off; a dozen or two, maybe.

TAIRA

(whistles melodiously)

What an idea for a good Sunday supplement article. Two dozen suns in a universe eight light years across. Wow! That would shrink our world into insignificance. The readers would eat it up.

BEENAY

(with a grin)

Only an idea, but you see the point.
(MORE)

BEENAY (cont'd)

During an eclipse, these dozen suns would become visible because there'd be no real sunlight to drown them out. Since they're so far off, they'd appear small, like so many little marbles. Of course the Cultists talk of millions of Stars, but that's probably exaggeration. There just isn't any place in the Universe you could put a million suns - unless they touch one another!

Sheerin listens with gradually increasing interest.

SHEERIN

You've hit something there, Beenay. And exaggeration is just exactly what would happen. Our minds, as you probably know, can't grasp directly any number higher than five; above that there is only the concept of "many". A dozen would become a million just like that. A damn good idea!

BEENAY

And I've got another cute little notion. Have you ever thought what a simple problem gravitation would be if only you had a sufficiently simple system? Supposing you had a universe in which there was a planet with only one sun. The planet would travel in a perfect ellipse and the exact nature of the gravitational force would be so evident it could be accepted as an axiom. Astronomers on such a world would start off with gravity probably before they even invented the solaroscope. Naked-eye observation would be enough.

SHEERIN

(doubtfully)

But would such a system be dynamically stable?

BEENAY

Sure! They call it the "one-and-one" case. It's been worked out mathematically, but it's the philosophical implications that interest me.

SHEERIN

It's nice to think about... As a pretty abstraction, like a perfect gas, or absolute zero.

BEENAY

Of course, there's the catch that life would be impossible on such a planet. It wouldn't get enough heat and light, and if it rotated there would be total Darkness half of each day. You couldn't expect life - which is fundamentally dependent upon light - to develop under those conditions. Besides...

Sheerin's chair goes over backward as he springs to his feet in a rude interruption:

SHEERIN

Aton's brought out the lights!

BEENAY

Huh?!

Beenay turns to stare, and then grins halfway around his head in open relief.

There are half a dozen foot-long, inch-thick rods cradled in Aton's arms. He glares over them at the assembled staff members.

ATON

Get back to work, all of you. Sheerin,
come here and help me!

Sheerin trots to the older man's side and, one by one, in utter silence, the two adjust the rods in makeshift metal holders suspended from the walls. With the air of one carrying through the most sacred item of a religious ritual, Sheerin scrapes a large, clumsy match into spluttering life and pass it to Aton, who carries the flame to the upper end of one of the rods. It hesitates there awhile, playing futilely about the tip, until a sudden, crackling flare casts Aton's lined face into yellow highlights. He withdraws the match and a spontaneous cheer rattles the window. The rod is topped by six inches of wavering flame!

Methodically, the other rods are lighted, until six independent fires turn the rear of the room yellow. The light is dim, dimmer even than the tenuous sunlight. The flames reel crazily, giving birth to drunken, swaying shadows. The torches smoke devilishly and smell like a bad day in the kitchen. But they emit yellow light.

There is something about yellow light, after four hours of somber, dimming Beta. Even Latimer lifts his eyes from his book and stares in wonder. Sheerin warm his hands at the nearest, regardless of the soot that gathered upon them in a fine, gray powder, and mutters ecstatically to himself:

SHEERIN

(mutters)

Beautiful! Beautiful! I never realized
before what a wonderful color yellow
is!

TAIRA

(suspiciously wrinkle her
nose at the rancid odor)

What are those things?

SHEERIN

Wood.

TAIRA

Oh, no, they're not. They aren't burning. The top inch is charred and the flame just keeps shooting up out of nothing.

SHEERIN

That's the beauty of it. This is a really efficient artificial-light mechanism. We made a few hundred of them, but most went to the Hideout, of course. You see...

(he turns and wipes his
blackened hands upon his
handkerchief)

...you take the pithy core of coarse water reeds, dry them thoroughly, and soak them in animal grease. Then you set fire to it and the grease burns, little by little. These torches will burn for almost half an hour without stopping. Ingenious, isn't it? It was developed by one of our own young men at Saro University.

After the momentary sensation, the dome quiets. Latimer carries his chair directly beneath a torch and continues reading, lips moving in the monotonous recital of invocations to the Stars.

Beenay drifts away to his cameras once more, and Taira seize the opportunity to add to her notes on the article she was going to write for the Saro City Chronicle the next day - a procedure she had been following for the last two hours in a perfectly methodical, perfectly conscientious and, as she was well aware, perfectly meaningless fashion.

But, as the gleam of amusement in Sheerin's eyes indicate, careful note-taking occupied her mind with something other than the fact that the sky was gradually turning a horrible deep purple-red, as if it were one gigantic, freshly peeled beet; and so it fulfilled its purpose.

The air grows, somehow, denser. Dusk, like a palpable entity, enters the room, and the dancing circle of yellow light about the torches etch itself into ever-sharper distinction against the gathering grayness beyond.

There is the odor of smoke and the presence of little chuckling sounds that the torches make as they burn; the soft pad of one of the men circling the table at which he work, on hesitant tiptoes; the occasional indrawn breath of someone trying to retain composure in a world that is retreating into the shadow. It is Taira, who first hears the extraneous noise. It is a vague, unorganized impression of sound that would have gone unnoticed but for the dead silence that prevail within the dome.

The newswoman sits upright and replaces her (paper) notebook. She holds her breath and listens; then, with considerable reluctance, threads her way between the solaroscope and one of Beenay's cameras and stands before the window. The silence ripped to fragments at her startled shout:

TAIRA

Sheerin!

Work stops. The psychologist is at her side in a moment. Aton joins them, and even Yimot, high in his little lean-back seat at the eyepiece of the gigantic solaroscope, pauses and looks downward.

Outside, Beta is a mere smoldering splinter, taking one last desperate look at Lagash. The eastern horizon, in the direction of the city, is lost in Darkness, and the road from Saro to the Observatory is a dull-red line bordered on both sides by wooded tracts, the trees of which had somehow lost individuality and merge into a continuous shadowy mass.

But it is the highway itself that holds attention, for along it there surge another, and infinitely menacing, shadowy mass.

CUT TO:

EXT. ROAD TOWARDS OBSERVATORY - NIGHT

We see the crowd of mad people, lips soaked with froth, face and hands covered with blood. They look more like zombies. The crowd is running as a single mass, people are trampling the fallen, tearing their clothes.

No understandable words are heard, these creatures are no longer intellectual - the sounds they make are those of beasts, not men. Yet many still carry clubs and iron rods, ready to kill.

CUT TO:

INT. OBSERVATORY'S DOME - CONTINUOUS

ATON

(cries in a cracked voice)

The madmen from the city! They've come!

SHEERIN

How long to totality?

ATON

Fifteen minutes, but... But they'll be here in five...

SHEERIN

Never mind, keep the men working. We'll hold them off. This place is built like a fortress. Aton, keep an eye on our young Cultist just for luck... Taira, come with me!

INT. THE LADDER - CONTINUOUS

Sheerin rushes out the door, and Taira is at his heels. The stairs stretch below them in tight, circular sweeps about the central shaft, fading into a dank and dreary grayness.

The first momentum of their rush carries them fifty feet down, so that the dim, flickering yellow from the open door of the dome disappears and both above and below the same dusky shadow crushes in upon them. Sheerin pauses, his hand clutched at his chest. His eyes bulge and his voice is a dry cough.

SHEERIN

I can't... Breathe... Go down...
Yourself. Close all doors...

Taira takes a few downward steps, then turns:

TAIRA

Wait! Can you hold out a minute?

(cries)

Stay here, I'll be back in a second!

She dashes upward two steps at a time, heart pounding - not altogether from the exertion - tumbles into the dome and snatches a torch from its holder. It is foul-smelling, and the smoke smarts her eyes almost blind, but she clutches that torch as if she wanted to kiss it for joy, and its flame stream backward as she hurtles down the stairs again.

TAIRA

Sheerin! We've got the light!
Sheerin, wake up!

Psychologist's glazed eyes reflect the flame. It takes Taira a couple of moments to realize that Sheerin is dead. Shocked, she steps back in a horror.

TAIRA

The Darkness took him... It's all
for real, he was right, it's real!
It's real!

(she cries)

Aton! Aton!!!

The professor, pale and shaking, appears out on the door upstairs. View of dead Sheerin almost makes him unconscious.

ATON

But... But...

TAIRA

No time, no time, sir! Get a hold on yourself! There's still something we must do! Come with me!

Holding the torch at tiptoe height and, propping the tottering professor by an elbow, she makes her way downward in the middle of the protecting circle of illumination.

INT. FIRST FLOOR - CONTINUOUS

The offices on the ground floor still possess what light there is, and Taira feels the horror about her relax a bit.

TAIRA

(brusquely passes the torch to Aton)

Here! You can hear them outside!

CUT TO:

EXT. OBSERVATORY'S TERRITORY - NIGHT

The mad crowd is already at observatory's site. People start attacking the scientific equipment in animal rage, they don't care for injuries. Some madman throw themselves at observatory's walls, crushing their heads in concrete. Luckily, all of them are literally crazy, so there's no plan in these attacks, and nobody is looking for a door.

CUT TO:

INT. FIRST FLOOR - CONTINUOUS

Taira & Aton hear scraps of hoarse, wordless shouts. But Sheerin was right; the Observatory is built like a fortress.

The windows are protected by the grillwork of inch-thick iron bars sunk deep into the concrete sills. The walls are solid masonry that an earthquake couldn't have touched, and the main door is a huge oaken slab rein - forced with iron. Taira shots the bolts and they slid shut with a dull clang.

TAIRA

Done!

At the other end of the corridor, Aton curses weakly. He points to the lock of the back door which had been neatly jimmed into uselessness.

ATON

That must be how Latimer got in...

TAIRA

(impatiently)

Well, don't just stand there, help drag up the furniture! And keep that torch out of my eyes, The smoke's killing me!

She slams the heavy table up against the door as she speaks, and in two minutes they built a barricade which makes up for what it lacks in beauty and symmetry by the sheer inertia of its massiveness. Somewhere, dimly, far off, we could hear the battering of naked fists upon the door; and the screams and yells from outside have a sort of half reality.

TAIRA

(groans)

Let's get back to the dome!

INT. OBSERVATORY'S DOME - MOMENTS LATER

In the dome, only Yimot, at the solaroscope, is keeping his place. The rest are clustered about the cameras, and Beenay is giving his instructions in a hoarse, strained voice.

BEENAY

Get it straight, all of you. I'm snapping Beta just before totality and changing the plate. That will leave one of you to each camera. You all know about... About times of exposure...

(he passes a hand over his eyes)

Are the torches still burning? Never mind, I see them! Now remember, don't... Don't try to look for good shots. Don't waste time trying to get t-two stars at a time in the scope field. One is enough. And... And if you feel yourself going, get away from the camera!!!

ATON

Taira, take me to the window. I can't breath.

The newswoman does not answer immediately. The vague forms of the astronomers wavered and blurred, and the torches overhead have become only yellow splotches.

TAIRA

(whimpers)

It's dark...

ATON

Fire!

(he puts his palms on his face)

Fire! We need more fire! D... Did I just said that?..

TAIRA

(shivers)

Wait, I'll take you.

Somehow they make their way across the room. Taira closes her eyes against the Darkness and her mind against the chaos within it.

ATON

I can't see... I can't see
anything...

BEENAY

(whispers)

Is that you, Aton?

ATON

Beenay! Don't worry about the mob.
The place will hold them off...

(he crawls down the wall,
unable to stand on his
feet)

Latimer, the Cultist, rises to his feet, his face twisted in desperation. His word was pledged, and to break it would mean placing his soul in mortal peril. Yet that word had been forced from him and had not been given freely. The Stars would come soon! He could not stand by and allow... And yet his word was pledged...

Beenay's face is dimly flushed as it looked upward at Beta's last ray, and Latimer, seeing him bend over his camera, makes his decision. His nails cut the flesh of his palms as he tense himself. He staggers crazily as he starts his rush.

There is nothing before him but shadows; the very floor beneath his feet lacks substance. And then someone jumps upon him and he goes down with clutching fingers at his throat. Latimer doubles his knee and drives it hard into his assailant.

LATIMER

Let me up or I'll kill you!

TAIRA

(cries out sharply and
mutteres through a
blinding haze of pain)

You double-crossing rat!

The newswoman seems conscious of everything at once. She hears Beenay croak:

BEENAY

I've got it! At your cameras, men!

And then there is the strange awareness that the last thread of sunlight has thinned out and snapped. Simultaneously Taira hears one last choking gasp from Beenay, and a queer little cry from Aton, a hysterical giggle that cut off in a rasp - and a sudden silence, a strange, deadly silence from outside.

And Latimer had gone limp in her loosening grasp. Taira peers into the Cultist's eyes and sees the blankness of them, staring upward, mirroring the feeble yellow of the torches. She sees the bubble of froth upon Latimer's lips and hear the low animal whimper in Latimer's throat. With the slow fascination of fear, Taira lifts herself on one arm and turns her eyes toward the blood-curdling blackness of the window. Through it shine the Stars!

Not Earth's feeble thirty-six hundred Stars visible to the eye; Lagash is located in the center of a giant cluster. Thirty thousand mighty suns shine down in a soul-searing splendor that is more frighteningly cold in its awful indifference than the bitter wind that shivers across the cold, horribly bleak world.

Taira staggers to her feet, her throat, constricting her to breathlessness, all the muscles of her body writhing in an intensity of terror and sheer fear beyond bearing. She is going mad and knows it, and somewhere deep inside a bit of sanity is screaming, struggling to fight off the hopeless flood of black terror.

It is very horrible to go mad and know that you are going mad - to know that in a little minute you would be here physically and yet all the real essence would be dead and drowned in the black madness. For this is the Dark - the Dark and the Cold and the Doom. The bright walls of the universe are shattered and their awful black fragments are falling down to crush and squeeze and obliterate her.

Taira jostles someone crawling on hands and knees, but stumble somehow over him. Hands groping at her tortured throat, she limps toward the flame of the torches that fill all her mad vision.

TAIRA

(screams)

Light!

Aton, somewhere, is crying, whimpering horribly like a terribly frightened child.

ATON

Stars... All the Stars... We didn't know at all. We didn't know anything. We thought six stars in a universe is something the Stars didn't notice is Darkness forever and ever and ever and the walls are breaking in and we didn't know we couldn't know and anything...

Someone claws at the torch, and it falls and snuffes out. In the instant, the awful splendor of the indifferent Stars leap nearer to them. On the horizon outside the window, in the direction of Saro City, a crimson glow begin growing, strengthening in brightness, that is not the glow of a sun. The long night had come again.

FADE TO BLACK.