

“A sword is dangerous to the man at the point, but not to the man at the hilt. Unless the man holding the sword is a fool, or careless, or unskilled, in which case it is twice as dangerous to him as to everyone else.”

Robert Jordan

The Great Hunt

Approximate Earth Year 1521

The comet was traveling on its usual trajectory, as it had for thousands of years, until an unusually large asteroid appeared. Cruising at incredible speed, the comet was unable to slow to avoid the celestial object now veering directly into its path. If it had had eyes, it might have closed them just before impact. The collision was astonishing. The asteroid immediately became space dust, but the massive ball of ice and dust was only knocked off its original trajectory. For many decades the comet followed its new path, making an uneventful jaunt through the galaxy. It flew past multiple planets and stars. Each gravitational field it passed bent the comet's orbit slightly, nudging it closer to impact with a binary star system and the unsuspecting desert world it housed. Finally, passing between the planet's two suns, the comet boldly announced its presence in the night sky.

PART ONE

Chapter One

The Arenian Luminary Watcher had been on duty for five nights straight. He took his eyes off the sky for a few minutes and glanced down at the planet's surface. With one of the usual dust storms raging he could see little, but then there was little to see. The extreme heat and harsh environment on the surface could support little life. He was thankful he didn't have to brave that desert, thankful his people had made their homes by burrowing deep into the planet's cliffs. There they'd found water and were able to grow food.

He shivered at the forbidding scene and returned his eyes to the sky. The object he'd been tracking was still there. He'd first noticed it three nights ago and each night since it had moved closer to Arenaes. He still wasn't sure what he was seeing, but he did have an idea and that idea terrified him. Finally, having performed numerous observations and calculations, and having seen that the object continued to grow brighter each night, he brought his findings to the attention of his superiors.

Soon his colleagues had verified his assertions, having seen for themselves the object and the facts. It was a comet and it was headed for their home. They could do nothing but wait for the inevitable.

The Luminary Watchers and the scientific community not only calculated that the comet's path would lead to a direct impact, but they had also determined that the impact would be an ELE, an Extinction Level Event. The Arenian Council of Thirteen met to plan what to do, six delegates from the north, six from the south, and their elected leader, Tilsar. They knew they needed to act quickly.

The council decreed that to ensure the survival of the species ten secure refuges should be constructed, five in each hemisphere. Ten of the most fortified cities were selected to serve as such, and these were transformed into survival fortresses.

The Arenian Council of Thirteen also decreed that, since these cities could not hold the entire Arenian race, a list of those chosen to live should be compiled. Any government, on any planet, in any star system, in any galaxy would have done the same. The list included those vital to ensuring the survival of their species and their history. In order to diversify the population, other citizens were picked via a lottery. It wasn't fair, but it was necessary. Each of the ten fortresses could only house one thousand Arenians. This meant that the rest of the population was chosen to die—if the cities they lived in could not withstand the impact with the killer comet or the aftermath of the collision.

These fortified encampments also had large areas for storing all scientific, historic, and medical materials, and they were large enough to also house many vehicles. The materials, machines, and secrets that could not be secured within these fortresses were secured in other bunker-like facilities dug into other hills. The general population was unaware of these. Survival of knowledge, as well as of the species, was critical.

Nature, though, has a way of playing with the minds of every intelligent species. While the long-ago collision with the asteroid had not destroyed the comet, it had damaged it. The asteroid had hit the comet at an angle, creating a long, deep gouge, with hairline fractures that spread out from the gash. Now, as the comet passed between the solar system's two suns, the gravity from each pulled the comet into different directions, widening the fractures.

The Arenians were waiting for their demise when, minutes before hitting the point of no return, the comet shattered into six pieces. The four smaller pieces bounced harmlessly off the atmosphere. The remaining two pieces were larger. They punched their way through the planet's atmosphere. Just before impact, the immense pressure became too much. Both exploded violently, one above each hemisphere. The devastation was horrific. The two airbursts were several minutes apart, but the results were the same. At each hemisphere's ground zero the sand was superheated to temperatures near that of the sun, melting an area about fifty miles in diameter. When cooled, these turned to a crystal glass. The shockwaves that followed the explosions reached far beyond these areas, destroying everything within a thousand miles. They stirred up the sandy, silicate landscape, sending enough into the atmosphere to blot out the heat and light from the planet's two suns for many months to come, dropping temperatures to never-before-seen lows. This phenomenon alone took the lives of many.

When the twin suns could again be seen, and the temperatures had returned to normal, the violent ELE-driven storms subsided and Arenaes's normal seasonal patterns returned.