

# Learning to Hide

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## Learning to Hide

I stood on the surface of a dead world. The world I once knew had been wiped clean. The wreckage of the spacescrapers around me stuck up in the air like burned matchsticks. The radiation count was lower than I expected, but then the scientists had said that the weapons used to wipe humanity from the surface had a half life of less than twenty years. In a century, we could return to the surface. As soon as the Machines left. But then, they'd only just arrived.

The gray muddy ash had settled over everything two inches deep. The thick dark clouds overhead rumbled with discharging lightning and acidic rain, but it wasn't falling where we were. It was 2132 – twenty years since we destroyed the Earth.

On purpose.

We killed forty billion people that day.

Jan stuck her head out of the bunker and shouted at me.

“Can you see anything?” Her voice was changed by the plexiglass of the helmet's visor; it came across deeper and fainter than it usually was.

“Nothing!” I shouted back. I know what you're thinking, mass murder doesn't become me. I didn't push the button; I was only a kid at the time. It's been hard living in the cities built deep in the earth in an attempt to save the species from extermination. I was five when I last saw the sun, the last time I saw a tree growing on the surface.

In 2079 we got our first and only visit from ET's. They were a ragtag group of five starships, all of them running from the Machines. There were sixteen races on board, all of them having lost their homeworlds. Each of them had holovids of the destruction of

their civilizations. We watched hundreds of thousands of starships go to war against the Machines and all of them were turned to flaming wreckage. Then the Machines turned their attentions to the worlds themselves, wiping the face of life from them completely.

It was depressing to say the least.

Most people wanted to fight the Machines. But the evidence provided by the ET's showed that no amount of firepower would stop them. Seventy-eight races had attempted it – seventy-eight that we knew of – and every one had failed to stop their advance through the Quadrant. And Earth was a backwater compared to some of these civilizations.

The ETs didn't stay long, repairing their ships in orbit and restocking using materials we gave them. They gave us some technology – not the FTL drives we wanted – they couldn't be replicated on Earth, but other tech. We were on our own. They did take a group of twenty humans with them in an effort to save the species. An alien ark racing through the night ahead of the unyielding flood.

An endless debate erupted over what to do. In the mean time, shadow wings of several allied states decided to join together and build a series of citadels beneath the earth. Their master plan was to do the simplest thing – hide. They knew they couldn't win. It was a rare admission from the military, but it was necessary for the survival of the species.

In 2099, with the hype of the coming machines began to wane, the early warning spacecraft sent out into the deep void of space on the trajectory the ET's came in on began transmitting seriously bad information regarding the coming Machines. Each of them were intercepted, disassembled and consumed even while transmitting compressed video back to Earth. Huge black Spheres – silent and massive– rushed toward us at FTL, following our radio and video signals. Too late we realized we were like noisy neighbors.

This information was never presented to the populace.

In 2105, individuals and families began to disappear all over the world. A massive selection process began and those chosen were cloistered in the underground cities. Placed into suspended animation – frozen. Political dissention began to rise, propagated

by the shadow government whose goal was to produce public video and radio transmissions that would be picked up in time by the Machines.

Civil wars began to sprout up around the globe. Protests over the heavy handedness of the United Nations and other nations began increase. Threats of conflicts between the massive powers of Oceania and the Neo-Americas began to dominate the news. I was five when we were chosen to descend into the shadow city under Detroit. That was in 2112. The world went up in flames that same year.

The shadow military had twenty million people stored underground. Over ninety nine percent of them in cryogenic cold storage – the rest dedicated to monitoring to machine’s approach. After the world was toasted, radio transmissions were flat out banned; every transmitter had been disassembled or destroyed. I knew what a radio was, though I had never seen one. Every source of communication that remained was by shoe-net or shielded cable. Nothing transmitted over air was allowed. Only the automated beacons remained on a couple of orbiting satellites that were configured to turn themselves on and broadcast when anything entered orbit around the ruined earth.

For all intents and purposes, the Earth was dead.

The satellite beacons in orbit went wild an hour before Jan and I was scheduled to go out and do our weekly testing for atmospheric levels. So here I stand, blanketed in steel and rubber, safe from the radiation that had killed most of the life on the face of the Earth. Roaches were all that remained. I had seen several as we came out of the bunker to the surface during other outings to take rad readings. I hadn’t seen any other form of life. It was terribly depressing but no life on the surface was the goal. We didn’t know if the Machines considered insects to be a threat or not.

Jan approached me, tugging me down into the bunker opening.

“Feel that?” she asked, gesturing to the ground. A low rumble began to form. The dust shimmered all around us. “We need to go silent!” I agreed and settled in on the bunker’s lip, watching for movement.

A silent earth was what we needed.

I heard a low roaring sound and backed farther into the bunker. The sound of the re-breather mask over my mouth competed with it, but I realized that some form of vehicle

was approaching. The red lights of multiple roaming beams coursed over the hulk of a spacescraper that lay to the south, and then the Machine came into view.

“Will you look at that?” Jan whispered. Her fingers dug into my arm, but I barely noticed her touch. This was the enemy. The vehicle, if you could call it that, looked like a millipede, with a hundred thousand appendages, each of them writhing like snakes around it. It flowed over the land gracefully, leaving no marks, like it was hovering. From each appendage shined a red light, waving over the ground in brilliant patterns. Every now and again, the beams would pass over something and that object or space would shine white and then burst in a shower of sparks. Like fireworks on a summer evening.

In the distance I could see dozens of them, swarming towards us in a wave. The sound of their clicking and roaring became deafening.

It took me a bit to realize what they were doing. Cleansing. Destroying every bit of organic matter that we hadn't destroyed ourselves. I didn't know if that threw a kink in the scientist's plans to repopulate the earth in another century, but little could be done about it now.

I grabbed Jan's wrist and tried to pull her back into the bunker and out of sight. A flock of cockroaches scurried out of the darkness, panicked by either the presence of us or the coming Machines. Startled, Jan stumbled and fell down - out of the darkened safety of the bunker. The roaches scurried around my feet and over Jan. She swatted at them, her face disgusted as she batted at them, struggling to rise.

“Jan!” I shouted to her, but I knew she couldn't hear me over the roaring of the Machines. The red light washed over her exposed left arm and several scuttling roaches. She pulled her arm back out of the light, but the suit had already begun to spark. Within seconds, the cockroaches ignited in bursts of white light.

Jan's face contorted in agony and she struggled to her knees. Her arm showered embers and disintegrated, filling the confined space of the bunker with hot white light. She collapsed forward, her right arm reaching out to me as she was consumed.

I couldn't do anything for her, the sparks striking and melting the front of my suit. The light got so blinding that the suit's filters kicked in, turning everything black. I missed watching Jan die. The suit saved me from that pain. Even so, I felt the heat of her

immolation through the plastics and steel of the suit. It got so bad I retreated into the darkness of the tunnel that led downward.

Jan was dead. PFC Janice MacMillian was dead. And no one would know until I climbed the three hours down to the Listening Post and told Corporal Market.

I couldn't believe it. We had been friends and sometimes lovers. Now she was ash. I crawled back up to the bunker, slow and methodical to see if anything of her remained. Peering around the corner, I saw nothing but the waves of red light, washing over the stone, reflecting over the opening of the bunker. I crawled forward, trying to see the outside. As the wave of Machine millipedes scoured the land, the number of sparks diminished until they were far and few between. The beams had purged all life from the surface.

The machines moved on. And still I sat. I checked my air; found the re-breather still had another couple hours of life to it. So I sat there, looking out over the devastation that once was my home - once purged by man, now a second time by Machine.

I edged closer to the bunker opening, peeking over the edge in the direction the Millipedes had gone. They were floating upwards - all of them - ascending into the clouds - their appendages fully extended and flailing, but the red beams had ceased.

Suddenly to the south everything went white. Blinding. The suit's filters kicked in almost immediately, tempering the flash. From that direction a windstorm roared through and I watched thousands of metric tons of ash suddenly be sent into the air. Then another flash. And another. Flash, flash, flash... The suit couldn't keep up and simply turned the visor black. I was blind. The suit told me I was receiving a massive dose of neutron radiation and without it I'd be dead in seconds. With the suit alarms in my ears, I fell back into the bunker, lost my bearings and decided just to wait for my destruction.

They were bombing the earth. Scouring it clean. This was the end. We had failed.

After what seemed like hours, the multitude of flashes stopped. The wind storm outside continued unabated. I waited for the destruction of the Earth by the massive weapons we had seen used on the other planets. But it never came. Earthquakes rumbled and rocked the ground, but they started and stopped infrequently.

In time, my air ran low and I was forced below to trek the three hour walk down to the Listening Post.

The ground still shook with earthquakes, though the farther down I went, the less intense they got. Three hours later, I walked into the LP, finding Corporal Markett on his knees praying. After I sealed the door, I took off my helmet. The front of my suit was puckered with burn marks. The radiation sensors in the suit had burned out. It practically glowed with residual radiation. I wouldn't be having kids anytime soon anyway – if ever. It had done its job. I was still alive.

“Any word?” I asked, kicking the suit outside and sealing the door.

“Word from the Deep says it was a planetary wide bombardment, nothing centered. They don't think we've been discovered. They burned a hell of a lot of the oxygen off the atmosphere.” He looked behind me. “Where PFC MacMillian?”

“She's a pile of ash on the surface.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah, shit.” I sat down next to him and put my head in my hands. People died all the time. Forty billion died in one day twenty years before. Today was just another day. The body count was absurdly low in comparison.

We guessed that the atomics we used didn't clean the face of the planet enough to satisfy the Machines, so they finished the job for us. The white flashes were neutron based, so heavy that there wasn't a living thing in the air or land for twenty feet down in the ground. Nothing but dead soil. Just the way they wanted it.

The Machines hung around for another month, their campaign continuing on through the Quadrant. During that time I made two more trips to the surface, it had been cleansed completely. I didn't see a single cockroach either time. They were thorough - very thorough.

Remote satellites that were not destroyed by the initial Machine onslaught were brought online by a shadow base on the moon and through them we discovered that the Machines had left Sentinels behind in orbit. They sacrificed their lives to tell us of the Sentinels existence in a broadband spectrum announcement before they were eventually consumed.

Hopefully they too would leave in time, believing the Earth a dead world. Until that time, we'd sit in our holes, watching, waiting for our time to move. Hiding like rats in a hole.