

Sample chapter from...

Crater

by

David S. Leyman

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Chapter 1

An old lady passing by looked up at him in surprise as he appeared from behind his car. He smiled at her; she hurried on, her feet pattering in the puddles.

Struggling for his car keys, he became aware of a distant grating sound. Not loud, it was almost like a rumble of thunder had become, somehow, coarser.

He put the key in the lock and peered over the top of the car. Over to the right of the hill in the West the sky was lit up. He was accustomed to seeing the sky bright there from the lights of Edinburgh and the last gasp of sunset but this... this was different. The light seemed to stretch further sideways; the cloud also seemed odd, like a huge eddy.

“You’re seeing things in your old age, *Laddie*.” He told himself. “Let’s just get home and put the kettle on.”

He drove over to his house near the hill, seeing the clouds looming over King Arthur’s Seat. He became aware that the only lights left were the lamps on his car and other cars on the road. No streetlights, no lights from the houses, schools or shops. Utter darkness all around him.

Gradually, slowly, people emerged with torches and candles looking up and down the street to see if anyone else had power or if they were alone in their darkness. Satisfied that it was a general power cut, they went back inside. Kyle was left on his own again.

He had, inevitably, a sleepless night. It was an unusually hot summer’s night. No fan to cool him and that sound of grating in his head. ‘It must have been some sort of illusion’ he thought to himself, discounting the fact that there was no electricity—anywhere.

There was gas to make breakfast and brew tea. Typically British, he found tea a necessity in the mornings. He checked the milk from the refrigerator; it was still unspoilt.

Taking a deep breath, he stepped outside. Everything seemed perfectly normal. The birds still sang; the leaves in the trees lining the street still rustled in the early morning breeze. He looked up at the hill, looming over the row of houses in the West of Portobello where he lived. It was lit up in the early morning sun shining over his shoulder.

Time for work. The car started smoothly, he engaged ‘drive’, and moved off. The horizon beyond the houses where he lived had changed. Something dark and massive that should not have been there rose above the rooftops.

He turned right at the end of his street and was stopped by a constable. The Officer was

pale, shaking and wide-eyed with shock.

"I'm sorry, Sir. Ye *canna* go this way. The road's blocked, *ken*."

"Blocked with what, Officer?"

The policeman just shook his head, clearly unable to form words cohesively. He waved his hand at Kyle indicating that Kyle should turn the car around and go back.

In the mirror, Kyle could see the policeman just standing in the road like a marionette that had it's strings cut; mouth open and eyes round.

He parked outside his house and got out of the car, aware that there were the beginnings of a traffic jam in his street with cars milling aimlessly around.

A driver poked his head out of the window.

"*Ye ken how tae get into the toon?* Everything seems *tae* be blocked up."

"I'm sorry. I just tried to get into the City but got turned back. Something has happened but I don't know what it is."

Kyle didn't mention that big, black mass, over the roofs in the near distance. He went in to the house and changed his shoes for a pair more suited to walking.

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Not far from his house was a small corner shop run by a couple of elderly Pakistanis. They had been there for as long as he could remember; they were also a valuable source of 'last minute' groceries and *dvds* for those long, dark, winter evenings.

There was nobody in the shop. The door was wide open but neither Aqbar with his wide, welcoming smile, nor Fatima, with her nervous and shy look out of the corner of her eye at you, were in sight.

"That's unusual." Kyle said to himself. He considered that saying it aloud might attract Aqbar out from whatever he was doing to come and serve in the shop.

Nothing. No movement.

Kyle left a note and took a few bottles of water from the shelf near the door. He put two in his pockets and one in his hand.

Several hundred metres behind his house was the wall that went around the hill on which the fort was built. He knew there was a place in Lilyhill Terrace where pedestrians went through and, after a short search, he found it and walked through. A long, hard slog later, he found himself in a clear area overlooking the city. The path had been ill marked when he had been young but now it was fairly well worn and simple to follow. It was still not easy to climb for someone who has been sitting at a desk for too long. He turned away from the wall of rough rock to gaze out over the view. The last time he had been up here there

had been no new buildings in the City Centre. This time was similar. This time there was also no new buildings—there was also no city!

What he saw was a vast crater. The edge, right up to near his street, was a wall of debris that now buried most of the hill. Certainly the castle and fort were underneath a pile of earth. The rubble extended way past anything he could see left or right. It extended towards Cramond and the Firth of Forth to the right and down past Loanhead to the left with no break. In the distance, coming up from south of west, was a huge skid-mark. He supposed that it might have just missed Livingston and Bathgate and been just north of Penicuik, stopping just short of Dalkeith.

He took out his map and compass from the bag over his shoulder. The skid-mark was, as far as he could tell, about twelve kilometres wide and came in at two hundred and forty two degrees.

The skid-mark terminated in a slightly curved dome, metallic and shining, bright in the late morning sun that, even now, was appearing over the heaped up ridge of dirt in front of Kyle. He estimated the distance that he could see and, making a few mental calculations on the map, confirmed a diameter of almost twelve kilometres for the disc. He watched a helicopter move slowly across the sky directly over the saucer, or ship... or whatever it was. The chopper flew slowly and methodically as if it was looking for something specific. He recognised the craft as one of the Sea Kings from Rescue Service that were operated by the Royal Air Force. High above that was a Nimrod, also of the Air Force, circling over the area.

Vaguely, through the churning of his mind that failed, as yet, to come to terms with the destruction, he wondered where the Nimrod had come from. He couldn't see Edinburgh Airport, probably that had been scraped away at the edge of the saucer's track—not that there were Nimrods operating from there, of course. He sat down heavily just as his mobile telephone rang, giving him a shock that almost sent him tumbling down the hill.

"Where are you? It sounded like you had an accident." A voice asked.

"Nearly. Who is it? I thought the lines would all be down."

There was a stunned silence at the other end. "Why?"

"We have no power here. Who are you?" He glanced at the 'phone to see if the identity was on the small screen.

"It's Michelle. Glasgow. You know?"

"You've got power?"

"Yes. We're all OK here, why would we not be? But I can't get through to Uncle Malcolm by land-line or by mobile. Could you try from there?"

Kyle went cold all over. Malcolm lived over by Kirknewton. He could see where that

used to be from up here on the hill. "I'll try but there's no power here so all the transmitters will be down."

"I'm speaking to you."

"Yes. From Glasgow, which probably has its own set of transmitters." He mentally cursed Michelle. She was far too bright for a fourteen year-old and far too precocious, too. Her Mum ought to have a chat with her about those lads she hangs around with over at the 'Centre' in Rutherglen.

"Well, try anyway. I need to speak to him about the wedding that's coming up this weekend. He said he'd come and do the decoration on the cake. It's getting close now, you know?"

"Yes. I'll try, Michelle. But don't hold your breath waiting for an answer."

Kyle folded his 'phone shut and silently cursed himself for not being able to tell Michelle what had happened. He knew she was intelligent and would understand. Of course it would sadden her but there was no indication that Malcolm had been at home last night; there were lots of relatives around that he could have visited and often did.

He sat down heavily, depressed. Holding his head in his hands he surveyed the scene below with a mixture of disbelief, horror and grief.

"Hello. Terrible, isn't it?"

Kyle jumped in surprise. He looked up and saw a pleasant looking man in his early thirties, maybe, peering down at him. A hand was held out.

Kyle took the hand as he rose into a standing position somewhat awkwardly on the rough surface.

"I am Roland Curtis. We appear to have had the same idea."

"Oh... er... yes. I'm Kyle. This is appalling. What is it, do you think?" He stared wide-eyed at the scene before them. What had happened had still not sunk in; it was all too raw. The scale of it was beyond the scope of his ability to comprehend. He was accustomed to disasters when a few people were killed as in the oil rig accidents and helicopter crashes that occurred from time to time or when there was a traffic accident. This, though, was incomprehensible.

"It seems to be some sort of a space ship that has crashed." Roland said.

"It crashed? Is this how it normally lands? I've never seen a space ship before. How does something this big get into space?"

Roland peered at him. "I don't think anybody here has seen anything like this before. What do you do for a living?"

Kyle thought that was an odd sort of question considering the devastation lying before them. "I'm a Quantity Surveyor."

The expression on Roland's face spoke volumes. He was clearly sorting through his memory trying to find out what a Quantity Surveyor does.

"And you? What do you do?"

"I'm a Graphic Artist. Do you know any Engineers?"

Another odd question. "What sort of Engineer, there are lots of different types."

Once more, Roland had the expression of one who was sifting through filing cabinets in his memory to try and find the answer. "Someone who understands Molecular Engineering."

"Maybe someone at Herriott Watt Uni... Oh. That's gone. Perhaps Strathclyde University or Abertay University in Dundee might know, I don't know for sure."

That expression again.

Kyle had the strangest sensation that he was fainting. He thought that this was a bad place to become unconscious but a voice in his head told him to be calm, relax. He felt himself straighten up as if by remote control and then nothing until he felt a hard surface under his back and the sound of a helicopter above.

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They had taken him to a military camp and held him in a cell. Now someone in plain clothes was interrogating him with an army officer standing behind.

"You were on the hill above Edinburgh Castle."

It sounded like a statement but Kyle knew it was a question.

"Yes."

"You don't remember coming down the hill."

"No."

He wondered what all this was about. The hard surface that had been underneath him was the space ship—or whatever it was. A helicopter had lifted him off and brought him to this place where nobody seemed to believe what he was saying.

"Where did this Roland something character come from?"

"Roland Curtis? I don't know. He must have walked up the hill the same as I did."

"How do we know you walked up the hill?"

"How else would I have gotten there? That's absurd. Besides you can ask him or look for the note on the counter for the bottles of water at the Pakistani shop near my house."

“We found your note but you had no water on you when we found you. Perhaps you had drunk it all already.”

“Then ask this Roland character.”

“When we find him we will.”

“Find him? He is not on the hill?”

“You said you went up the hill on the eleventh. You met Roland the same day, yes?”

“Yes.”

“You were picked up on the fifteenth. You appeared on top of the ship near one of the circles that we assume to be some sort of hatch.”

“Assume?”

“Why don’t you tell us?”

“How would I know?” Kyle was puzzled as to how this was going.

“You must have come out from the hatch to get there. The perimeter is tightly guarded so there is no other way.”

Kyle shook his head. “How would I have got to the ship from the hill, if it is so tightly guarded, in the first place?”

“Ah! That is what we want to know. And where did you spend those four days?”

Kyle shook his head again. He had no recollection of anything between being on the hill and then lying on the ship. Nothing—completely blank.

Somebody knocked quietly on the door; the officer opened it and returned to his position behind the interrogator. Two men walked in, one was in the uniform of an American Army General and the other was a tall, well-built man in civilian clothes.

The General shook hands with the interrogator.

“Don’t mind if we have a little chat? Seems this fellow here has a knack of getting information.” He indicated the tall man.

“No. Help yourself. The interrogator said, standing up and motioning for the tall man to sit.

Once he had made himself comfortable the tall man said, almost in a whisper, “My name is Hugh Morrison. Do not be alarmed. Try to relax. I am not here to cause you physical or mental pain, just to try and find out what happened to you.”

“It’s the space ship, isn’t it?”

“Yes. The space ship. It’s the first one to land on Earth—if ‘land’ is quite the right word. We have no idea what they want or why they came here or what their problem is, if they

have one.”

Kyle had difficulty trying to hear what Morrison was saying. It was the quietness with which he spoke.

Morrison looked at him for a few moments and then said “Are you comfortable? I should like you to be comfortable. Your comfort is very important to me.”

Kyle’s mind started to slip. There was a vaguely familiar feel that he had experienced up the hill. He tried to fight it but it overwhelmed him. He relaxed and slipped into a sort of deep sleep where he was aware of all that happened around him but seemed unable to move or inter-react.

Morrison’s voice came into his head. It was gently probing, softly going into corners he didn’t know were there.

“How did you get down from the hill?”

“I walked down.”

“What happened to Roland?”

“He sat down and went to sleep.”

Kyle’s lips felt thick as if he was trying to speak through someone else’s mouth. Morrison’s voice scratched away at his brain removing the black paint obscuring his memories. As he spoke to Kyle more and more memories became clearer, shining through the opaque barrier that had been there. Images came that both alarmed and excited him.

After what seemed like hours had passed but was, in reality, only several minutes Morrison asked him to tell the story from the beginning.

Kyle was still feeling remote from himself and speaking as if with someone else’s voice but gradually stumbled into his narration of events.

“Roland Curtis spoke to me on the hill as if he was not used to speaking and as if he was unfamiliar with ideas and words that would seem to be normal. As he spoke I became disorientated, dizzy. I don’t know how long I felt like this but when my head almost cleared he was sitting on the ground looking stunned. I still felt blurry and began to get thoughts that were strange to me. Thoughts came into my head that I did not understand or memories came of things that meant nothing to me. At some point I seem to remember giving myself a command to go to Dundee and that I should put a picture of the place in my head. I had no idea where to go in Dundee but the idea of Chemical Engineering was there so I thought of the University and that’s where I went. Everything went misty and swirled around for a moment before I was standing in the driveway going into the main entrance of the University building. At the time there was no consideration of anyone seeing me just ‘appear’ there, this only comes to me now.

We went into the building where I asked at reception for anybody who was an expert in Chemical Engineering and was directed to Professor Brian Ingles.

The Professor was very friendly but went limp when we were on our own. I felt as if I'd been abandoned, I couldn't move or speak. After a short while everything started to spin around and I woke up in a strange place. It was obviously metal; the walls had a metallic appearance. There were a couple of screens and keyboards but not using the sort of symbols we are accustomed to seeing.

My head was full of formulae and facts about chemicals; I knew people I'd never met and remembered places I've never visited. Worse still, I remembered friends with no bodies that I saw in my mind only as wispy shapes in pale blue that were darker or lighter as their mood changed. I saw—can still see, different planets and a place, like a small box, where I lived. I have no name, only a concept of 'me'. My friends have no names; only the idea of 'them' as individuals.

A machine came into the room and operated one of the keyboards. One of my friends is in the machine; he operates it almost telepathically. It is rather like we use a remote control on a television set but with more functions and greater accuracy. The machine represents our bodies. The mind is the only thing that can withstand the journey through interstellar space because our bodies are weak and spindly, they are easily rendered inoperative by radiation. We can interface with the machines because they are more durable and give us the tactile facility that we need to operate the ships.

Our ship is a Raider. We use it to attack other civilisations so we can take over their planets. Then the Gatherers come in and reap the harvests we need to sustain us. We need raw materials in all forms, especially vegetation, for our biomass processors. We estimate that your planet can be stripped of all plant material in three to four years including re-growth.

First, we need fuel to return to the fleet and report. Your people will supply us with this fuel. You have the expertise and the equipment can be built. We shall take over your bodies for the time needed to accomplish this, which is approximately fifteen of your rotational periods—days.

This will happen. You have no defence against us.”

Kyle sagged down in the chair. General Walthers took his wrist, checked for a pulse at the neck and called softly for a medic.

It had started; the first interstellar war. Our first contact had turned into a battle with an enemy we hardly knew, was apparently indestructible and possessed technology beyond anything we understood.

But we had Kyle and his memories.

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