

Earth Song

Book 1 in the Earth Song Series

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*'One is never afraid of the unknown;
one is afraid of the known coming to an end.'*

– Krishnamurti

Chapter 1

The car ferry churned its way over the fog-covered sea, a foaming white trail eddying out across the water's surface. The icy mist numbed my face as the deck vibrated slightly through the soles of my walking boots.

The woman in the ticket office said the view of Orkney would be amazing as we approached. She said I would never forget my first sight of the island...

I peered ahead through the mist towards the sooty outline of land, screwing up my eyes as if hoping to develop X-ray vision, but the featureless grey fog still sucked the view away.

At the sound of a door closing behind me, I glanced round. An old man wearing an equally ancient and worn waterproof jacket had appeared on the deck. Earlier I'd seen him drive a knackered Saab on to the ferry. An unlit cigarette was glued to his lip by the power of saliva. He fumbled in his pocket and withdrew one of those old-fashioned flint lighters. A clunk and a click and a flame spluttered in the breeze long enough for him to light his rolled cigarette.

The guy pulled the collar of his jacket up as he took a long drag of the cigarette, which glowed like a hot coal. He let out a contented sigh as he ambled towards me across the empty deck.

Like always, my instinct flashed up a warning at his approach. Every stranger had to be treated with caution, especially since the car crash that had destroyed what remained of my former life.

The Overseers played dirty and I couldn't afford to take any chances.

I cast a subtle glance at the old guy. He seemed an unlikely recruit for the secret organisation, who, to my knowledge, favoured ex-military personnel. Besides, this wouldn't be the first innocent elderly guy to single me out. For reasons unknown to me, I seemed to be like catnip to them.

'Nice weather for it,' the man said in a warm Scottish accent as he neared.

'Yeah, sunlight is so overrated.'

He snorted. 'You're a tourist, then?'

'Sort of.'

‘Oh, I see. Well, Miss *Sort of Tourist*, you could’ve picked a better time of year to come than now.’ He lifted his hand. ‘I’m Patrick, by the way.’

I shook his surprisingly warm hand, but I didn’t offer up my own name. I, Lauren Stelleck, needed to keep off everyone’s radar as much as possible, and that included revealing too much information.

Thankfully, Patrick didn’t seem to expect me to reciprocate. Instead, he sucked on his cigarette and leant on the railing to peer out into the fog, seeming to settle for companionable silence. And with my crowded headspace at the moment, that was good.

The wind started to moan around us and, like curtains rolling back at a theatre, the fog swirled aside to reveal a looming cliff line. In front of it rose a huge pillar of rock surrounded by thousands of whirling seabirds. Even at this distance, I was almost certain that the dark birds with white chests, stubby wings and flappy flight paths were puffins.

‘That view is quite something,’ I said.

‘The Old Man of Hoy is a grand old sight. And that entire area is a nature reserve.’

‘It looks like it’s straight out of a *Jurassic Park* film,’ I replied, allowing myself a brief smile towards this stranger.

‘Sadly, you won’t find any T-rexs roaming around there. Although that would be great for the tourists.’

‘Maybe, but possibly less so for the bird life, hey?’

He snorted. ‘Aye, lass.’

The wind howled and whipped up the waves.

As the air started to turn bitter, Patrick withdrew a hip flask from a pocket. ‘Do you fancy a wee dram just to take the chill away?’

‘A margarita is more my usual speed.’

‘Maybe so, but you’re here for new experiences, am I right?’

More than he realised. ‘I guess I am.’

Patrick unscrewed the top of the flask, took a sip first, and then handed it to me.

I held the flask for a moment. If by some miracle he was working for the Overseers, if the drink was spiked, he wouldn’t have tried it first. No, on this occasion, I could give my usual paranoia a brief break.

I took a cautious sip and whisky fire tanged my tonsils. After the heat rush, the rich

aftertaste hinted at peat and honey. The afterglow slipping down my throat was like someone had just turned a radiator on inside me – way better than porridge could ever manage. I wiped the top of the flask with my sleeve and handed it back to him.

‘That’s very smooth.’

‘The finest single malt in all of Scotland, Orkney’s very own Highland Park,’ Patrick replied.

‘I think I could develop a taste for it.’

He nodded. ‘Whilst you’re on the islands, you most certainly will. It’ll snare a part of your heart forever.’ He took another sip and gazed out towards Hoy.

‘And you’re a poet too.’

‘We islanders are dreamers of every sort.’

I smiled at the mental image of a windswept island filled with hopeless romantics. The old Lauren would have fitted right in, the woman who viewed radio telescopes as a love poem from humanity to the cosmos. But that version of me had been lost six months ago when my aunt had died.

I’d been on the verge of giving up this whole business when a UFO sighting over Exmoor had caught my attention. After months of frustration, I’d decided to make one last-ditch attempt to capture evidence of a craft.

The crazy thing was, Aunt Lucy shouldn’t have even been there. But she’d known how strung out I’d become whilst trying to prove that UFOs actually existed. She’d always supported me in every half-crazy dream that I’d set my heart on, even my brief attempt to be a singer in my early teens.

So she was with me for moral support as we drove along a twisty B-road through Exmoor one June day six months ago. A truck had appeared out of nowhere and rammed us from behind, forcing Aunt Lucy to lose control of her Mini. We’d crashed into a wall, but it was no accident. I knew that when a guy in black combat fatigues and a ski mask had emerged from the truck and headed towards us, a pistol in his hand.

As I’d been pinned in the crumpled Mini, I’d spotted the scar radiating from his left eye. I still remembered the icy feeling of dread that had unleashed. You see, I’d come across Mr Eye Scar before. Despite my broken arm, I’d tried to shield my aunt from what I’d known was coming.

In those last moments, she'd whispered that she loved me as she began to lose consciousness. Only then had I spotted the blood running down the side of her head from where her skull had hit the door frame.

A strange calm had filled me as I'd cradled my aunt and waited to die with her. I'd tried my best, but it was our time. Then, in a split second, everything had changed when a police car had rounded the corner.

The assassin had stood stock-still for a whole second, the expression in his eyes wavering behind his mask. But then he'd run back to his truck and sped away. The police car had then screeched to a halt next to us and called for an ambulance.

But it'd been too late.

Less than a minute later, Aunt Lucy had died in my arms and my soul had shattered into a million pieces that would never be put back together.

There had been a helicopter search and temporary roadblocks across the moors, but the guy and his truck were never seen again. The police had run the truck's number plate, which had turned out to be fake—no surprise to me.

MI5 had later asked me about Mr Eye Scar. He'd led the assault team that'd stormed Jodrell Bank and murdered all those people that awful night. And the secret organisation he worked for? The Overseers, who, among other things, were behind the conspiracy of silence about the truth of UFOs. And they had killed my precious Aunt Lucy.

It had made this more personal than ever. I was even more determined to destroy the Overseers' organisation and everything they stood for. And if I came across Mr Eye Scar again, nothing would be off the menu when it came to dishing out some well-deserved vengeance.

It was why I was here on a ferry bound for Orkney—chasing down the latest lead in my hunt for the truth.

My attention snapped back to reality as the ferry rolled down a deep trough in the waves and spray erupted over the boat. Patrick and I were doused with water as the ferry rolled up the wave.

I shuddered as the weaknesses in my cagoule were found by watery fingers and my skin grew soaked. 'Shit, that's cold.'

Patrick raised an eyebrow at me. His waterproof dripped with seawater and his wet grey hair stuck to his head; he looked toasty warm with glowing red cheeks.

‘Aye, it’s getting a bit fresh,’ he said. ‘We may as well head back to the car deck. We’ll be landing soon.’

‘No car for me. I’m a foot passenger.’

‘Are you now? Someone meeting you at the harbour?’

‘No, I’m travelling solo for this trip. Is there Uber on Orkney?’

‘Uber what?’

I smiled. ‘Don’t worry about it—I’ll find a taxi.’

Patrick shook his head. ‘No need, because I’m going to give you a lift.’

My honed survival instinct kicked in. Patrick might have looked like a harmless old man, but I hadn’t managed to evade the Overseers since the crash by getting careless with strangers.

‘Honestly, don’t worry about it.’

‘What, you think I may have wicked plans for you?’ His mouth curled into a smile.

‘No...but... Well, you know.’ I raised a shoulder.

‘You can’t be too careful?’

‘Sorry, just a bit wary about people I don’t know.’

‘I understand.’ He sighed. ‘Modern times, hey? Anyway, there’s a taxi rank at the harbour.’

‘Thanks—and sorry, especially when you’re just trying to be a saint.’

Patrick’s smile widened. ‘It’s not the first time that’s been said about me.’ He winked.

I laughed. ‘Right.’

‘So where are you staying, anyway?’

For someone I’d just met, this guy was certainly asking a lot of questions. But he hadn’t forced the issue when I’d refused his offer of a lift, which made me more inclined to trust him. Besides, I needed some info.

‘I haven’t sorted any accommodation out yet. My plan was just to wing it,’ I said. ‘I don’t suppose you know anywhere to stay near Skara Brae?’

Patrick’s eyes tightened on me for a fraction of a second. ‘Ah, the archaeological tourist hotspot.’

‘That’s the one.’

‘But not normally so popular in the winter.’

I shrugged. ‘I’ve come all this way, especially to see it.’

‘Any particular reason?’

God, this guy was nose-y. I needed to shut this conversation down. Time to throw in my cover story. ‘I’m writing a thesis about Skara Brae being the forerunner to Stonehenge.’

Patrick’s brown eyes peered into mine like he knew I wasn’t telling him the truth. ‘Older than the pyramids, they say.’

‘Yes...’

‘No other reason then?’

Oh, Patrick so knew the real reason I was here. After all, I wouldn’t be the first. The UFO boards had been filled with reports of the investigators who’d come out here to study the outbreak of strange symbols that had been appearing all over Orkney. People were already saying it was the latest form of crop circles, another phenomenon I’d been sceptical about initially.

If you had told me a year back, I would one day know everything about crop circles, I would have laughed in your face. But that was the old Lauren. The new version of me, the person standing on a freezing ferry, was a completely different woman.

Patrick tipped his head to one side, still waiting for my answer. ‘I’m pursuing my research into Skara Brae,’ I said, trying to sound convincing.

‘I see...’

I could tell by the way his expression stiffened almost imperceptibly that Patrick thought I was lying. Not that it mattered. Everyone had their secrets, although mine were bigger than most.

Patrick gazed out towards Orkney with a faraway look in his eyes. Together we watched a bird, possibly a gannet, dive into the surf. A moment later, it surfaced with a silver fish trapped in its beak. Patrick finally turned back to me.

‘I can recommend a wonderful pub with the cosiest rooms not too far from there. The Guillemot. Great seafood and –’ he tapped his flask, ‘plenty more of this there too, including some from a fine fifteen-year-old cask.’

I laid on my best winning smile for him. ‘That all sounds great.’

‘Grand stuff. Just tell the taxi driver, the Guillemot, and they’ll know the way. But my offer of a lift still stands.’

‘Thanks, but no. I’m sure you understand.’

‘I do... Like I said, sad times.’

‘They are...’ I gave him an apologetic smile as the ferry turned towards the harbour, now visible in the distance.

‘I’d better get back to my car. We’ll be landing soon,’ Patrick said. ‘Anyway, nice to meet you, lass. I hope your research goes well.’

‘Thanks. And thank you for introducing me to Highland Park.’

He smiled. ‘Any time.’ He nodded to me and then headed to the doorway.

Behind the ferry, thunderous black clouds were rolling in towards the island. The forecast had mentioned something about a big storm on the way.

Rain patted down, rapidly intensifying. I drew my jacket in tighter round myself.

As the ferry slid towards the harbour, I grabbed my rucksack from the seat where I’d left it and prayed I wasn’t chasing another dead end.