

Choices

“I can’t believe you paid \$3.00 for a swallow of water.”

“It’s Fountain of Youth Water,” a high-pitched whine replied.

“It’s water!” the man exclaimed. “It’s the same all over the planet!”

No, it isn’t, Marlene Sheridan thought, tuning out the couple behind her in line.

It’s the reason Dad is missing and why I’m in this coffee shop, biding my time while I wait for my CSI sister to arrive.

“Next,” the counter clerk called.

“Large mocha latte,” Marlene ordered.

“Make that two.” A twenty dollar bill appeared over Marlene’s shoulder as the clerk rang up the order. “Add a double shot of vanilla to the second.”

Marlene turned to the woman behind her. “Karen?” She threw her arms around her sister and hugged. “I wasn’t expecting you for hours. How did you get here so quickly?”

“Thank you.” Karen extracted herself from the hug, took her change from the clerk, and guided Marlene out of the way. “I was in Jacksonville testifying on a trial. After you called, the prosecutor asked for a continuance. Instead, the judge extended court and allowed me to testify. By the time court finished, it was late. I stayed in a hotel last night and left first thing this morning.”

“Two mocha lattes. One double shot of vanilla.”

The women grabbed the cups and moved off to doctor their drinks.

“Now,” Karen said as she stirred in sugar, “tell me what is going on?”

Marlene's head swiveled left then right. Leaning closer to Karen, she said, "Not here. I'll tell you on the way." She pulled Karen out of the coffee shop.

"On the way where?"

"It'll be easier to show you than tell you."

#

"How did you find this place?" Karen asked as she tied the boat to a rickety dock.

"Dad discovered some strange anomalies in Mexico," Marlene explained. "He traced them to the Fountain of Youth in St. Augustine. That's when I discovered that the water quality was weird."

"Well, it is the Fountain of Youth."

"Yeah, but that's just a gimmick." Marlene handed Karen her backpack, then shouldered her own. Grabbing a machete from the floor of the boat, she jumped onto the dock. "It was proven years ago that the water in the Fountain has no rejuvenating properties."

"And yet people flock to the park every year. Why do you need that? What did you find?"

"This way." Marlene pointed inland and led the way. "Stay on the trail. Some of these plants are poisonous if they scratch you."

Karen tugged at her three-quarters sleeve of her camping shirt. "Maybe I should have worn long sleeves?"

"It's only this first quarter mile," Marlene assured her as she swung at an overhanging limb. "We cleared most of them away. The machete is for the ones that continue to grow."

“Ok.” Karen stepped over the dead limb grateful for the long canvas pants and hiking boots they both were wearing. “So what was odd about the water at the fountain?”

“It had the same sedimentation and bacterium you find in water at levels of 4000ft below sea level.”

“That’s not possible.”

“Exactly.” Marlene swiped at a large prickly vine, then stepped aside for Karen to pass her.

They stepped into an open field dotted with moss-covered stones, resembling ancient ruins. There were stone columns, stone altars, large blocks of granite, chunks of debris, and a stone floor partially covered with grass and moss.

“Wow,” Karen exclaimed.

Marlene smiled. “We felt the same way when we saw it.”

“Who built it?”

Marlene shrugged. “We don’t know. This island isn’t on any map. In order to prove my theory about the fountain water, we drove fifteen miles off the coast and dove for water samples. When we surfaced, a storm had snuck up on us. We tried to get back to land, but got knocked off course and landed here. When we looked around, we found this.” She gestured to the ruins.

Karen interjected. “Dad was so intrigued he wanted more time studying it.”

“I did too,” Marlene defended their father. “We marked the spot on the map, and went back to the mainland for the permits and supplies.” She pointed to the corner of the field where the three canvas tents Marlene and her father had used stood.

“But since the island doesn’t exist in any legal records,” Karen deduced, “there was no need for paperwork.”

“Exactly.” Marlene walked towards the tents. “Yesterday, I went back to the mainland for more supplies. Dad stayed because he was in his ‘zone’.” She made air quotes with her fingers.

Karen nodded. “I remember when he is like that. It’s a quality the two of you share.”

“Anyway,” Marlene brushed off the comment. “When I got back, I found this.” She pulled back the flap of one of the tents. Three tables had been flipped on their sides. Computer equipment lay broken on the ground. Specimen containers vomited their contents onto the rest of the wreckage. “I went to the police in St. Augustine, but they can’t or won’t do anything.”

“It hasn’t been twenty-four hours since Dad’s been missing,” Karen pointed out.

“I think it’s because they think I’m crazy.”

“You told them about an island that doesn’t exist. In their shoes, I would too.”

“That’s why I decided to show you, instead.”

“Point taken.” Karen looked around at the mess and sighed.

A flash of light blinked in her peripheral vision. Turning her head, she saw it again. A gleam of sunlight danced off of something in the middle of the field.

“What’s that?” Karen asked.

“What?” Marlene peeked over Karen’s shoulder. “I don’t know.”

“Let’s check it out.”

“Dad’s cell,” Marlene whispered, leaning down to pick it up. “He must have come this way.”

“Spread out. See if you can find anything else.”

Stepping to the left, Karen’s foot slipped on a moss-covered stone.

The ground beneath their feet shook, knocking them down.

“What did you do?” Marlene demanded.

“What do you mean ‘what did I do’?”

A rumbling sound ran through the trees. Behind them, the ground disintegrated.

“Run!” Karen called.

The two raced across the stone strewn field.

“You must have done something,” Marlene chastised as she hopscotched across the collapsing stones. “Stone floors don’t collapse for no reason.”

“And islands don’t appear out of nowhere,” Karen countered, as she followed her sister’s path. “But according to you and Dad, this one did. Now shut up and move.”

The ground beneath their feet crumbled. The women plummeted through the earth and into an underground river.

Splash!

White froth enveloped them, dragging them down. Fighting the weight of wet clothes, their backpacks, and the force of the raging rapids, the women kicked their way to the surface, greedily sucking in life giving air.

“Karen!” Marlene spat out salty liquid.

“Behind you,” Karen coughed. “Grab my hand.”

Marlene turned. Her hand found Karen’s.

“D... d... don’t let go.” Karen’s teeth chattered.

“I... I... I... can’t hold on.”

Marlene’s blue tipped fingers slipped from Karen’s as the rapids pulled them into a whirlpool spin cycle.

“Karen!”

“Marley!”

As water flowed over their heads, wrinkled, blue-tinged fingertips clasped.

#

The algae covered stone fingers clasped as if each held the gift of life.

“Everything looks so real,” Marlene whispered as she swam through the “Garden of Statues”, heralded to be one of the greatest art exhibits in Mexico.

“Do you see what I see?” Albert asked. His voice sounded slightly mechanical through the radio of the diving helmet. “Look here.” Albert beckoned her to him. He hovered in front of a mother and child. “Look at their faces.” He pointed to the statues. “Now look at this.” He flipped through the laminated photo album he clipped to his dive belt. Shining his dive light on the picture, he held it up for her to see.

“They’re the same faces.” Marlene looked at her father. “Maybe the artist did it as a tribute to them.”

“These,” he shook the book, “are the missing passengers from that jetliner that went down somewhere over Southeast Asia, near Thailand. They are only now finding the wreckage.”

“And?”

“According to the artist’s website, it takes him at least a year to make the sculptures. It takes months to years to get this kind of growth.” He pointed to the algae. “How could the artist have recreated every single passenger, the crew, and the aircraft as it was when it crashed in the Indian Ocean, here?”

“It’s not possible,” Marlene answered after a moment.

“It is if there is some other explanation for all of this.”

“What other explanation could there be?”

A flashing light around them signaled their time in the water museum was over.

“I’ll explain later,” Albert promised. “Just know this is just the beginning.”

#

Just the beginning... just the beginning.

“Just the beginning,” Marlene murmured.

“Come on, Marley. Wake up.”

A sharp sting on her cheek had Marlene jerking awake. “Ow! What did you do that for?” Marlene glared up at Karen.

“What do you mean this is just the beginning?” Karen held out a hand, pulled Marlene to her feet.

“Huh?”

“You were muttering ‘just the beginning, just the beginning’.”

“Oh, that.” Marlene wrung out her dripping ponytail. “It was something Dad said.” She looked around. “Where are we?”

Karen shrugged. "Some kind of tomb." She picked the flashlight up off the floor and shone it around the room. The room was filled with hundreds of stone statues of various sizes and shapes. Marlene gasped.

"What?" Karen asked.

"We need to get out of here now." Marlene grabbed her backpack, handed Karen hers, and pushed her away from the statues. "Did you find an exit?"

"I think so." Karen swung the light across the room to an opening in the wall. "Over there."

"Then go. Quickly and quietly. Don't disturb the statues."

"Why?"

"They're alive."

"What!"

"Shhhh!"

Marlene crept past the statues to the opposite side of the room. She slinked to the opening at the end, keeping one eye on the figurines lined up in the middle of the room. At the doorframe, she stopped.

"I thought you said we had to get out of here, why are you stopping?" Karen demanded in a harsh whisper.

"Look."

In the middle of the room, encased in a glass coffin, lay Albert Sheridan.

"Daddy!" Karen shrieked.

The stone guardians blinked. As one, the group turned to their right. Arms linked, feet spread. A stone barricade formed between the women and their father.

“I told you not to wake them.” Marlene smacked Karen’s arm.

“We have to get to him.”

“Sure. You happen to have a sledgehammer in that backpack, because I left mine at home.”

“Listen, smart ass...”

“That’s right, I am the smart one. And as such, if you will look over there,” Marlene pointed to their left, “you will see a solution to our problem.” Marlene walked over to the other object that had caused her to pause.

“What is a computer control panel doing in down here?” Karen asked joining her.

“Giving you the answers you don’t really want to know.” Marlene tapped some keys.

A large-skulled, grey creature filled the screen. Its face was almost human except the head was extra long and had fronds sticking out of the sides. The words coming from the computer were English but there was no movement of its mouth.

We are the Crétrannach Zaštitnik.

“The what?” Karen asked.

The Crétrannach Zaštitnik. We have inhabited the ocean floor of this planet for many millennia.

“Why?” Marlene asked.

We were here first. Before the Ice Age, before the dinosaurs, there was us.

“So why are you still here?” Karen asked.

The planet shall be ours again, when your existence has ended. We are immortal. Your lifetime is but a blink to us. Besides, we find you amusing.

“Gee, thanks.”

“Are you the reason all these disasters are happening?” Marlene demanded.

We were forbidden by our gods from interfering in your development or lack there of.

“That doesn’t answer the question.”

No, we are not the cause of the disasters. You are.

“No, we aren’t.”

Not you personally. Human beings in general. You have been killing this planet for generations. Taking only what you want, not giving anything back in return.

“You’re talking about the global warming and climate changes,” Karen clarified.

Partially.

“What do you mean partially?”

There are other things.

“Such as?”

“The mysterious disappearances,” Marlene whispered. “You are talking about the unknown phenomena.”

Precisely.

“What does that have to do with anything?” Karen demanded.

“Don’t you get it, Karen? They’re saying the human race caused the disappearances?”

“How?”

Mishandling of technology you were unfamiliar with caused certain unforeseen occurrences.

“Ok, I have a master’s in biochemistry and work in the Miami-Dade crime lab where I see ‘unforeseen occurrences’ every day, but I have no idea what you are talking about.”

Mishandling of chemical and nuclear technology has resulted in the formation of several wormholes scattered around the globe.

“What?!”

“You’re saying these unexplained phenomena,” Marlene cut Karen off, “are wormholes?”

Correct.

“But wormholes have two sides. Where do the people who disappear end up?”

We transport them to a parallel dimension where they live out the rest of their natural lives.

“Hold it.” Karen held up a hand. “What do you mean ‘you transport them’? Where did the wormhole take them before you “transported” them?”

The wormhole brought them to us. They learned of our existence. We could not have them telling others. They had to be removed from the human population.

“That wasn’t your decision.”

We simply followed the lines chosen for them, choosing the lesser of two evils. We could have sent them back to where they encountered the wormholes. That would have led to a painful annihilation. Instead we sent them to a place where they were happy until the end of their lifespan.

“What about the people they left behind?”

We’re not heartless. We leave a memorial behind for them.

“The ‘Garden of Statues’,” Marlene whispered. “You’re the artist.”

One of us is.

“And what exactly is going to happen to us,” Karen demanded, “since we have also learned of your existence? Are we to end up in a glass coffin like our father? What did you do to him?”

He is fine. We have decided to let you choose your own fate.

“I say you...”

“Karen.” Marlene glared at her. “What are our choices?”

You can choose to live out the remainder of your existence in our parallel world with your memories intact and your family complete. Or you can return to your world, having forgotten everything about our race, this island, or your adventures here. You will live out the rest of your lives there until such a time as...

“Until what?” Karen asked.

We can say no more. You must choose.

“Not until you give us ALL the information. You left out something.”

We cannot tell you about future events. We cannot influence your decisions.

“That’s not what I’m talking about. I’m talking about the fine print of every deal.

What’s the catch?”

A wheezy sound emitted from the console. *You would have made a fine lawyer, Karen Sheridan.*

“Now, you’re just insulting me. Spill it.”

It is of no concern to you. We have told you everything that concerns you.

“That means it concerns the rest of the world,” Marlene deduced. “We want to know. We need to know.”

Why?

“Because,” she floundered. “Because all human beings are connected, whether they want to admit it or not. Any decision one makes will affect someone else down the line. We need to know how either of our choices will affect the rest of the population.”

Static filled garble followed. *Fine. If you should choose to inhabit the alternate universe, then the Earth will continue on in its natural progression, more or less. If you choose to return to your world, the population will continue as it is, until such a time...*

“What does ‘more or less’ mean?” Karen asked.

Give or take a few eons.

“Eons?”

“You mean time will speed up for them?” Marlene asked.

Their inevitable destruction will come sooner than expected, yes.

“And if we go back, it doesn’t?”

That is a possibility. The future is flexible. There are many possibilities. A loud mouth with a bad comb-over may stir up enough hatred and animosity that another war will occur. Or a blonde marine biologist may write a paper on the oceanic effects of global warming that changes how industries think about the environment.

“No one will publish my findings,” Marlene whispered.

Maybe there is nothing to find. Perhaps you need to change your field of study. Come to the parallel universe. Think of all the new things you can learn and study there.

“Sop it!” Karen cut in. “Leave us alone to make our decision.”

As you wish. Just push the button of your choice, when you have decided.

Text replaced the image. Each line had a corresponding arrow pointing to a button.

Pick this button to live in the alternate universe.

Pick this button to return to your lives.

Karen pulled Marlene towards the glass coffin. The stone guards parted for them. “You know what he would say.” Karen laid a hand on the glass.

“The needs of the many,” Marlene sniffed, “outweigh the needs of the few. He always loved *Star Trek*.”

“He’s not dead, Marley. And neither are we.”

“But what he... it said. We...”

“It said the future is not set. It changes. We get to change it. But we can’t do that if we are hiding out in a parallel universe with our heads stuck up our asses.”

Marlene nodded. “You’re right. Let’s do it.”

Together they walked to the console and pushed the button. Sparks shot from the console. The room shook. Debris fell. Water poured in. Green gas filled the room, choking them.

“What’s happening?” Karen asked.

“I don’t know.”

They raced back to the coffin. Several times, they were thrown off their feet as the floor shifted.

“What now?” Marlene coughed. The water had reached their waists and was rising.

Karen patted the top of the glass coffin. “Get on top.” She boosted Marlene up first, then accepted Marlene’s hand to get up.

The room tilted.

“Hold on.” Hands wrapped around wrists, they held tight as the gas overwhelmed them, sending them into oblivion.

#

Birds chirped. Salty sea air slapped at their faces.

Karen blinked, looking around. They were outside, on a boat. “Marley? Dad?”

“Here.” Marlene sat up. “Where are we now?”

“Look.” Karen pointed. “Isn’t that the island?”

“It was,” Albert said.

A fiery red mass sat smoldering in the middle of the ocean.

“Whatever you girls did,” he nodded to the red blob, “that’s the result.”

Marlene stepped away and bowed her head. “We chose to return to our normal lives with no knowledge of the island.”

“What do you mean?” Albert asked

Karen explained the choices. “Then how come we still have our memories?”

“Maybe because they realized you two are special, just like they are.” At their puzzled looks, he asked, “Didn’t you get my message?”

“You mean this one?” Karen held up the tablet she had pulled from Marlene’s bag and played the message.

“We were wrong, Marley.” His face was harried and pale. The image bounced erratically as if he as being chased, yet no one pursued. The message was full of static as

if someone was jamming his signal. “Not what we thought... unexpected... must stop... save... human... Karen’s book... find place... destroy... save... love... NO...” The screen froze on his horrified face.

“Hmmm.” Albert rubbed his chin. “I see the confusion.” He held up his hands and smiled. “Well, I’m just glad everything worked out.”

“Did it?” Marlene asked. “Where do we go from here?”

“We continue living our lives, Marley,” Albert said. “It’s all we can do.”

“I’m all for that,” Karen said. “Give me my lab with drug dealers and criminals any day. Better them than this.”

“Let’s go home, please?” Marlene asked.

Wrapping an arm around each girl, Albert said, “Gladly.”