

When she starts toward the tight crevice, she thinks she feels the ground move ever so faintly. Maybe it's just a touch of vertigo. "Rebecca?" The ground grumbles again; this time she knows it's a tremor. "Rebecca! Rebecca!"

The professor heads down the corridor leading from one of the intersections in this convoluted matrix of pathways and caves. "Rebecca!"

Dirt flakes and crumbles from the earthen ceiling above her, the trembling beneath her feet growing stronger. "Oh, sweet Jesus! Rebecca, where are you!"

Warning lights along the tunnel flash yellow and red, alarms squawking with deafening urgency. In the world above, sirens, muffled by the depth of the Pit, blare eerily over loud speakers, sounding so far away as if from some distant planet. Professor Braden runs down one tunnel, then into another calling Rebecca's name. When she reaches Corporal Chauvez's desk, she knows she's missed something. Corporal Chauvez rushes out to her, his desk is shaking so violently his Coke can falls to the dirt and jounces along the ground.

"Come on Professor Braden! We must go now! It's another quake!"

"Did Rebecca come through here? Mrs. Duccati, my assistant? Did she go up top already?"

"I've not seen her, but I'm sure she must have gotten out. Let's go. There's no time to talk!"

Alarms blare under flashing lights, people screaming, shouting. It's hard to concentrate. Researchers crowd onto the small elevator, wedged in together, others crowd near the base, waiting for it to come back down, pacing, their faces pulled with fright. Soldiers try to assure the civilians and scientists that everyone will get out, but it is clearly mayhem in the making.

"Come with me, Corporal," Professor Braden says, unwilling to leave Rebecca behind, believing she would not have gone topside without telling her.

"There's no time!"

"Come with me! Help me find Rebecca!"

He shakes his head. "I'm not allowed in there," he says. "I don't have the clearance to enter the—"

"Screw the frigging clearance, Chauvez! Help me find her!"

Professor Braden runs back into the tunnel, the movement throwing her side to side, like a tilting carnival ride, the once solid earth unnervingly fluid. She glances back. Chauvez is transfixed, his eyes bright with fear at all the skeletons. Huge chunks of rock and earth shake free

from the ceiling, crashing to the ground, smashing skeletons that cover the earthen floor, bones and skulls pulverized to dust. After a moment Chauvez seems to break himself free from his shock, running behind the professor. Professor Braden remembers she never checked the main theater where the huge metal object is. She cuts down one corridor then ducks into another until she knows they are close.

She enters, out of breath, bent down grabbing her knees. She doesn't even have the air to yell for her. "Call her name, Chauvez!"

"Mrs. Duccati! Mrs. Duccati!"

From high above, rock and soil shake loose, plummeting to the ground, some of the debris landing on the metal computer tables. Chunks of earth smash down against the scaffolding, stone and clay breaking into pieces along the metal uprights and wooden walkways.

"Mrs. Duccati! I don't think she's here Professor Braden. This whole thing's about to go! We have to get out!"

Dusty brown clouds foul the air, making visibility difficult.

"We can't leave her," Professor Braden says, finally catching her breath.

"We have to go! Now!"

"Go ahead, Chauvez. Go on. I can't leave her..."

Chauvez dashes toward the entrance to the tunnel, then stops cold. "There she is! Under the scaffolding! Mrs. Duccati!"

Professor Braden eyes Rebecca through the dust and haze, the rock and loam walls crumbling around them. Chauvez runs up to her, screaming. "Mrs. Duccati, we have to go! Now!"

Rebecca doesn't move, seemingly unaware of Chauvez standing three feet away from her, shouting at the top of his lungs. With her palm on the metal structure, Rebecca seems oblivious to the splintering world around her, her eyes placid, fixed, her demeanor blank.

Chauvez is about to grab her when Professor Braden shouts at him. "Don't! Don't touch her! Go on, get out of here!"

Stunned, and confused, Chavez is unsure what to do.

"Leave now, Corporal! That's an order!"

He hesitates another moment, then runs for the tunnel. In seconds he's gone. The scaffolding next to the metal object rattles and shakes, displacing the wooden walkways which

fall to the earth around the scaffolding, clattering along the platform floor. Professor Braden isn't sure how long the integrity of the room will hold. Computers and monitors shake, vibrate, tumble off tables. Lights explode. Sparks and flames shoot from the temporary electrical outlets. Fire eats along the provisional folding tables, consuming equipment and workstations. Enormous chunks of earth and granite fall slave to gravity, smashing banks of lights beneath them, the air choked with smoke and dust.

Professor Braden, trying to keep her balance in the tipsy turvy room, wends carefully over to Rebecca. "Rebecca," she says softly. "Can you hear me?"

Rebecca, with eyes open, fixed on some immutable moment in space or time, does not respond. "Rebecca, we must leave now."

All at once the shaking stops. Everything grows quiet, still, except for the yellow and red flashing lights, the alarms, the sirens trumpeting across the desert floor above them. A few seconds later, they stop as well. The sudden tranquility is disorienting, the tinny shrill echoes of sirens and bells still ringing in Professor Braden's ears, the ground steady and once again solid beneath her feet. She looks over at Rebecca who hasn't moved during the entire ordeal, transfixed by the enormous object she appears to have tamed. The scene is surreal and Professor Braden is unable to parse the otherworldly texture of the moment. She starts to reach out and touch Rebecca's arm, but that seems dangerous, not to herself, but to Rebecca. Instead, she whispers her name softly. "Rebecca."

Rebecca turns her head toward the professor. Expressionless, eyes vacant but calm. "We failed," Rebecca says, then removes her hand from the metal enigma and collapses to the ground.