

Entangled Earth

by David Lea

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This didn't really happen. Probably.

For Charlie

"Don't make me do it, please," said Celeste, grabbing Mia by the arm. "I can't even look up."

"You made me a promise and you're keeping it," replied Mia, brushing off her grip. "What would be the point in coming to Paris and not seeing it from the top? It's not so bad. You'll feel better once you're at the top."

"No, I bloody won't," said Celeste as she craned her neck upwards and looked at the iron latticework of the tower curving upwards away from her, nearly toppling over backwards before righting herself with a jerk. "How old is this fucking tower? Isn't it time they knock it down and replace it with something not made of hundred-odd year old iron? Something with windows, really thick triple glazed, reinforced windows?"

"Wimp," said Mia.

"Come on, you can do this," Celeste half muttered to herself.

Mia watched her friend struggling. She was feeling slightly guilty but she was glad Celeste was there. She didn't see enough of her, especially since the baby. Paris was Mia's first trip on her own since Freddy was born. She hadn't told Jack but she really needed a break from home life before going back to work. She felt guilty about leaving them but Jack understood and had insisted she go. The conference that had drawn her to Paris was a break but it was also Mia's plan for easing back into academic life before when went back to work properly. The venue for the conference flitted between a few different cities, picked depending on where the organisers decided they wanted a holiday. This year was Paris' turn.

"You really do this every city you go?" asked Celeste, staring at the ground.

"If there's something good to go to the top of, yes. It's a tradition now I suppose."

"You're a bloody lunatic."

Something happened to the team in Cambridge when they got out the lab that meant the conferences had become excuses for the attendees to go on drunken benders. Mia had somehow managed to get to the top of the Empire State Building with a massive hangover the year before she'd taken her sabbatical. The year before that she had been very thoroughly sick on, but thankfully not off, the viewing platform of the Tokyo Tower. The Eiffel Tower was next on her list and Celeste had promised to get to the top with her as a celebration of her impending escape from nappies and day time television.

The rest of the delegates were gathered at the conference center to watch the early morning live stream of an experiment being carried out in the lab she used to work in in Cambridge. Quantum entanglement was exciting stuff but even after a few years away Mia was familiar with the science. The lead scientist had joined after she'd left and wasn't a friend so she'd decided she could happily skip it to spend the morning with her friend without offending anyone. She rarely saw Celeste and this was the only time her friend could get off work and given the opportunity to visit Mia had jumped at the chance. This year she'd decided to do her climb before the boozing had actually started so she could see Paris with a clear head. It was just unfortunate for Celeste and her fear of heights that seeing her friend and scaling the tower had to coincide. Things wouldn't really get going until tomorrow at the conference. The networking, boozing and physics could wait.

Mia poked Celeste in the back with a knuckle "So, lift or stairs?"

"Fuck off! Stairs? Not a chance. Strap me into the lift and tell me when we're at the top."

There was a cough from behind them and they looked up to see the queue had moved up ahead of them. They scrambled up the steps toward the ticket booths and were beckoned over by an attendant waiting behind a glass screen.

"Deux vers le haut s'il vous plait," said Celeste through the plastic grid embedded in the glass.

"To the top is fourteen Euros fifty."

Celeste handed over the cash and took the tickets and the change, looking slightly disappointed she'd been rumbled as English so quickly. Celeste had been living in Paris for three years but she'd apparently yet to get the accent perfect.

"Why do they do that?" Celeste asked.

"What?"

"Reply in English. Pisses me off. It just reminds me I'm not really a local."

"Maybe that's the point."

Mia's French was limited to ordering beer so Celeste's efforts seemed fine to her. All she could muster was a few sentences of conversational French and a few words of Russian she'd managed to pick up from her mum. She grabbed Celeste's hand and dragged her towards the lift.

"Come on, let's get this over with so we can get some coffee and a croissant or whatever the locals really eat for breakfast," said Mia.

"I miss Shredded Wheat," said Celeste.

Mia was staying in Celeste's tiny apartment for the duration of conference, saving herself a fortune on hotel bills. They had slept in and then rushed to get in line before the queue got too big, forgetting to eat and now Mia's stomach was rumbling. They stepped into the lift cage and Celeste made her way past the other tourists who had gathered near to the front to get the best view and positioned herself as near to the middle of the cage as she could.

"Remind me again why you do this to yourself?" said Celeste.

"You're the one afraid of heights! I love it. I can't believe you've been here for years and never gone up," said Mia, grabbing her hand.

"I lived next to the Thames for six years. I never jumped in that either."

Celeste visibly restrained a yelp as the machinery juddered into action and the lift started to ascend. Mia stopped paying attention to Celeste and instead focussed on the view out through the lattice of metal surrounding them. At first, they were low enough down so the view of the city was masked by the buildings bordering the park where the tower stood but as they rose Paris went through a transformation as their view passed the rooftops. Churches turned from the barely visible tips of steeples to fully fledged pieces of gothic architecture and then gradually merged into the rest of the city. A complex web of streets stretched out into the distance and cafes and boutique shops slowly appeared along the winding streets. Somewhere out there, lost amongst the sea of hotels, was the conference center Mia was due to speak at tomorrow but she couldn't spot it yet.

Mia was the guest speaker for a small, fairly niche offshoot of the main conference focusing on quantum entanglement. She was young at 32 to be a speaker at a conference of this level, her PhD and 3 years of postdoc study at Cambridge notwithstanding. She suspected that she'd been bumped up the queue because she was a young and relatively attractive female, still something of a novelty in her field dominated by bearded men in their fifties. It was exactly the same phenomenon that had got her a couple of appearances on TV documentaries when she was still active in the field but token female or not she wasn't going to pass up the chance to move up from attendee to speaker and had jumped at the chance to present, even if it was only a rehash of some old work she'd finished years ago. She'd grown up with science in the house. Her dad had been a botanist and her mother had studied chemistry for a while before giving it up to raise her and her sister. They were both now happily retired and living by the sea in Bournemouth. The family rarely saw each other as a group and didn't have much to talk about other than science when they found time to socialise at Christmas and big birthdays.

After a minute or two of slow climbing the lift came to a lurching halt. The crowd poured out leaving Mia and Celeste on their own in the lift. Celeste finally released Mia's hand and Mia took the chance to shake some colour back into it. Mia put her hand on Celeste's back and gave her a gentle shove and they stepped out onto the platform. The first set of lifts stopped about a third of the way to the top where a wide platform housed the lower viewing area. Thick crowds of people bunched around the barriers, straining to get the best view. Mia hoped it would be quieter at the top. The four legs curved closer together here, each housing its own lift to carry passengers further up the tower.

"Really?" sighed Celeste as she saw the second set of lifts, waiting to take them the rest of the distance to the top.

"We could say this counts as you going up the tower if you want. I won't tell."

"No, screw it. I'm here now, might as well go all the way."

"Ok, come on then, let's get it over with. I don't think my hand can handle much more," said Mia, rubbing the feeling back into her palm and stepping into the second stage lift.

Celeste closed her eyes for the second journey up. Mia put her hand on her friend's shoulder in a poor attempt to reassure her but Celeste shook her off. The carriage started moving with a jerk and a rattle and their climb continued. When it reached the top of its ascent they stepped out to find another iron viewing platform. It was less busy on this level and they easily found a relatively quiet spot next to another young couple, brashly dressed, all money belts, Hawaiian shirts and expensive looking cameras. If Mia had to guess she'd say American tourists. Her nerves apparently calmed somewhat, Celeste looked around and took in the view, her fingers wrapped tight around the railings.

Mia looked out, taking in the view. After a few minutes of staring she pulled out the little map the conference organisers had emailed her. It had the tower marked in the middle and the conference center marked with a big circle. It wasn't far away and she had thought she'd be able to spot it but all the buildings looked the same from above and she'd rather be staring at the view than stood at the top of the Eiffel Tower staring at a map. She could see why people raved about Paris. It was a beautiful mix of old and modern architecture spreading out from the long patch of green parkland that surrounded the tower. The rest of the day was going to consist of coffee, pastries and wandering along the river trying not to look like tourists as Celeste browsed the little bookshops that lined the Seine. She wished Jack could be here with them, he'd love it, but Freddy was too young to appreciate a city break just yet and there wasn't anyone close to home they trusted to leave him with.

After a minute of slightly pained staring out at the city Celeste turned to Mia. "Ok, I'm done here. Take me down."

"Seriously? Can't we stay for a few more minutes?"

"Not unless you want to see me be sick," she threatened.

"Ok, message received. Can we just watch this first?" said Mia nodding towards the couple next to them. The man had lowered himself to one knee and was holding out a small ring box to his teary bride to be. She reached down and took the ring, placing it on one finger and stretching her hand out, the diamond glistening in the sun.

"Aaaw," said Mia, grinning.

"Cheesy," said Celeste, but she didn't stop watching.

"Want an ice cream?" asked Mia, eyeing a tiny snack shop on the platform.

"Are you kidding? You trying to make me sick?" said Celeste shaking her head.

"Come on! Live a little!"

Then the world disappeared. At least that's what it felt like. All of Mia's senses stopped working. She couldn't see or hear. The sense of having a body disappeared, like she was floating in one of those isolation tanks she'd lasted about five minutes in a few years back. This was much worse. It felt more like she was a brain in a jar, just a pile of thoughts with no physical form. Time seemed to stop, but it was hard to tell with no physical input at all, but at some point, either a millisecond or hours later whatever had happened unhappened. She was stood, eyes wide open as if nothing had happened when the world reappeared, flickering into existence around her, or she flickering into it. She lurched and grabbed the rail. Celeste stumbled and bumped into her. Had the same thing happened to Celeste? Mia started to look around but then came the noise. Mia heard it as if it was inside her head. It started with a high-pitched whine, like the whistle of an old steam train but getting progressively louder and higher. Soon it was all she could hear. The crowd all covered their ears. Mia turned to Celeste and mouthed "What?" but her friend was staring out at the city.

The noise ended abruptly and for a moment the world was perfectly silent, as if it was frozen in place. There was no quiet drone of traffic, no birds squawking, nobody said a word. The man next to them dropped the ring box he was holding and it hit the metal floor without a sound. The box bounced through the rails and over the edge, then a second later reappeared and flew past them up into the sky, buffeted upwards by a gust of air. Mia felt an enormous pressure on her chest and her ears popped. She screamed silently as a jolt of pain ran through her head. It was like someone had turned the pressure up on the world.

The tower underneath them lurched sideways with a loud crack. Celeste's tight grip on the railings held but Mia and the rest of the crowd were thrown to the floor. They slipped across the metal floor of the lurching platform. Mia was thrown against the stairwell in the center of the platform and stopped, her legs taking the brunt of the impact. The main mass of bodies carried on past her and past the stairwell. Mia saw faces screaming in fear as they flew past but no sound. All she could hear was ringing. Arms reached out to grab onto something but the flowing throng was gaining too much momentum, gathering more people as it slid. Mia could see where it was heading. The metal barrier on the far side of the platform was already amassing a pile of squirming people and more were heading right for them. The mass of bodies hit the barrier with a loud crunch. The metal buckled and

twisted, splitting and breaking apart but just holding in place, doing its job and keeping the writhing mass from toppling off the edge of the tower.

Mia reached out as the couple they had been watching slid past her but couldn't reach and could only watch as they landed in the crowd, piled up against the far side of the platform, now twenty feet lower than the side Celeste clung to. The impact of the last two bodies was too much and the metal finally gave way. Mia and Celeste watched in horror as the pile, now made of about thirty people slid and toppled over the edge of the platform and out of sight. The screams reduced to a quiet squeak by the ringing in Mia's ears. She felt something wet dribbling down her neck and reached up to find a slow stream of blood coming from her ear. She tried the other. More blood.

Oh god, am I deaf? she thought.

Mia yelled at Celeste, "Come on, this thing's coming down. We have to go. Now."

She could hear herself! Thank god. Mia's voice had barely penetrated the ringing in her own ears but Celeste clearly got the message. The tower was going to collapse and they needed to be off it when it did. Slowly shifting one hand at a time she shuffled across a few inches to the spot where Mia had slid from and shouted to her.

"Don't try and catch me," shouted Celeste, exaggerating the movement of her mouth so Mia could read her lips.

"Ok," Mia mouthed back, giving her the thumbs up sign. Celeste was a good three stone heavier than Mia. She understood.

Celeste let go with one hand, swinging her body around so her legs were in front of her pointing down the slope. She took a deep breath let go completely. She bumped hard onto the sloping floor and slid across the corrugated metal, each bump jarring up her spine. As she slid the tower lurched again and she slid straight past Mia and through the open door to the stairs. Celeste cried out as she came to a halt, half dangling over the first step of the spiral stairs. Then Mia was behind her gripping onto her collar.

"I'm not letting you go. Come on, we've got to move," she said, helping Celeste to her feet.

"No kidding! What the hell is going on?"

Mia shrugged. "No idea, but the top of the Eiffel Tower is not the place to be right now."

"Right. Let's get off this thing before it kills us."

They started down the stairs, encased in metal, reminding Mia of a long bird cage. Celeste went first, Mia following right behind her. The steps were more corrugated metal and the tilt of the stairs made progress uncomfortable and slow. Half way down they came across a gap in the stairs. The metal cage on either side of the staircase was torn in two as if something had been forced through and the stairs were twisted and buckled. There was no way to carry on as they were. They were going to have to skip a loop and drop through the gap. Mia stopped, looking puzzled at the damage.

"This makes no sense. What could have done this?"

"Terrorists?" asked Celeste. "Aliens? Roland Emmerich?"

"But how? There was no explosion, no light. It was as if..."

Celeste stopped her mid-thought. "We can worry about the how and why when we're safely on the ground Mia. Get a move on."

"Sorry, you're right. Go."

Celeste turned around and carefully lowered herself so she was dangling from the stairs, still feet above the next turn of the spiral. She let go and landed with a loud clang on the stairs below.

"I thought you were afraid of heights," shouted Mia over the ringing in her own ears.

"Adrenaline, does wonders," yelled Celeste. "Your turn."

Mia followed Celeste's example and carefully lowered herself down into her friend's waiting arms.

One step at a time, they struggled down the staircase. More and more of the strange holes appeared in the cage as they descended. Mia could see people moving down the stairs below them through the holes. They were the people who'd already been on the stairs when whatever it was that had happened had happened. They had a head start and weren't waiting around for Mia and Celeste. No-one wanted to be trapped in the restrictive stair case. The wind whistled through the mesh cage surrounding them, blowing dust in Mia's eyes. Step by step the middle platform came closer until at last they stepped out through the gate and into the open. Mia held Celeste's hand and looked around. Crowds of frightened people huddled together in the shadow of the upper platform, gathered in groups of fives and sixes, yelling questions at each other, no-one wanting to be on their own. Some stood at the edge of the tower, looking out over the city with blank expressions on their faces. Not everyone had made it. For every group of survivors there were twice as many bodies, covered in lacerations, limbs missing, pools of dark blood spilling out over the metal floor.

"Why haven't they evacuated everyone?" asked Mia.

Celeste just shrugged.

The lean was less pronounced here on the relatively open space of the platform and they took a moment to look back up at where they'd come from. The top of the tower was twisted and bent, curving to one side, and still noticeably moving. Rivets flew out of their sockets, clanging as they hit the iron girders. Behind them there came a deafening clang as one of the main supports shifted and bent. The staircase they'd just stepped out of broke away from the floor, twisting and scraping across the metal. It swept through a pile of bodies, smearing the remains across the floor then, just as suddenly as it had begun, it stopped. With a crack, the massive support strut finally gave up, folding inwards under the weight above it. The movement of the tower was no longer slow. The remaining three struts groaned and creaked in pain then with a snap, another strut broke. Not folding this time but shearing in two halfway along its length. The pull of the collapsing tower too was much for the other struts to take and it started to topple.

"Shit. It's going. Run," shouted Mia.

They ran up the slope, away from the path of the falling tower, crouching and curling up together and waiting, eyes shut, helpless. The snapped strut swung over them. Mia suddenly felt the warmth of sunlight as the metal above them was lifted away by the towers movement, pivoting on the two remaining struts.

If they hadn't been partly deaf already the noise would have done it. The creaking and screaming of the twisted metal was replaced by a single, massive bang as the tower reached its new resting place.

They stood and found themselves stood at the top of the tower again. What had been the middle platform of the grand old tower was as far up as it went. The top half of the tower lay on its side, resting suspended in the air, hundreds of feet above the Paris skyline. The base of the toppled tower still partly attached to one side of the platform, a mess of twisted girders and sharp metal spikes. The lift shaft had been lifted up with the tower, leaving a single lift sat uncovered, thick metal cabling piled on top. Where the stairs that had once led to the top of the tower had been was just a circular hole with a set of steps leading down to the ground below.

The city beneath the devastated tower was in a strange kind of chaos. Some buildings looked untouched, as if nothing had happened, while their neighbours would be completely demolished. Streams of rubble spread out like spider webs, criss-crossing each other as if it was flowing along some new pattern of roads. Flowing was the right word, it was as if something was alive under it. The rubble was moving, humps of junk and brick, one after another flowing as if giant unseen moles were burrowing underneath it. One of the things veered off its path and started in their direction. It ploughed into a so-far undamaged office building and popped out of the other side a few seconds later. The dust cleared as it carried on and they strained to get their first good look at whatever was causing this. There was nothing there, just a pair of parallel lines being carved out of the grass, whatever was causing them completely invisible but still hurtling straight towards one of the legs of the tower.

There was nowhere to run so Celeste and Mia just watched in horror as the leg burst into pieces. The invisible thing ploughed straight through without stopping, piercing a giant hole in the thick iron and leaving nothing holding the corner of the remaining tower up. Mia braced herself on a barrier for another collapse, this time with her and Celeste on top, but the tower didn't shift an inch. The corner of the tower seemed to be levitating, unconnected to the ground. Mia had just released her grip when there was a loud crash and she was showered in glass fragments. She ducked down, covering her head as the lift behind her was peppered with six inch holes by some invisible force.

Celeste stepped back from the edge. "What the fuck is going..."

Mia twisted to see why she'd stopped. Celeste's torso was gone. A huge hole had been punched through her chest and she could see clear through to the daylight on the other side. She just stood there, arms by her sides, no emotion on her face, motionless, with a gaping hole right through her.

Mia couldn't move. The thing that had eviscerated Celeste continued on its way and but now it was visible, it's outline clear from the covering of her blood. The shape was a bird, some kind of gull, wings flapping, red spray pouring off the tips as the blood slid off its surface. After a few seconds the blood had dissipated and the ghostly image of the creature vanished into nothingness. She watched as Celeste's body slowly toppled over, the upper half of her torso slumping downwards onto what was left with her pelvis. Her whole body overbalanced and slumped to the floor, blood pouring from the gaping wound in her torso. A figure, a woman, pushed herself out of one of the groups of tourists and screamed, pointing in Celeste's direction, but she wasn't looking at Celeste. It was happening all over. The terrible creatures were emerging from people all over the platform. The few birds had turned into a flock. Arms and legs were cut, splashes of blood splattered onto Mia. She saw a man's head severed almost completely at the neck, the bloody wing of the creature that did it visible for a few seconds before the blood slew off. One of the creatures, still caked in blood, swung around for another pass. A muscular black man had picked up a metal strut and he swung it, connecting directly with the creature mid-flight. The metal bar clanged and bounced right off it, sending the man stumbling backwards into a pile of bodies where he lay, gasping. The creature's flight carried on as if nothing had happened.

Mia felt a sharp pain in her arm. She screamed and felt her ears pop, the rush of sound, a whoosh of white noise that was soon replaced by the screams around her, almost overwhelming her. Looking down at her arm she saw a long gouge in the brown leather of her jacket, slicing the NASA patch she'd sewn onto her sleeve in two. She'd never been an astronaut but a friend had sent her the patch after she'd helped on a tiny part of an experiment for the International Space Station. Blood was slowly seeping from the gash. Mia picked it open to see a long but shallow gash in her arm. She dove to the ground flattening herself against it, feeling a rush of displaced air just above her as she dropped.

Nearly gone there girl, she thought to herself.

From where she lay she could see people being pulverised by the deadly invisible flock. She saw Celeste's hand and instinctively reached out and grabbed it, but it flopped in her hand lifelessly. She gasped and let go, the hand splattering into the slowly spreading pool of blood around her friend's body.

Then, as suddenly as it had started, the attack was done. The air was quiet again. Mia lay there looking around at the devastation. It was clear most of the others hadn't survived. It was a massacre. Streams of blood flowed over the corrugated metal floor and dripped off the edge of the platform, body parts were scattered everywhere. After a few moments, she gingerly got to one knee, holding her bloody arm with one hand. The things that had attacked seemed to have gone. She had been incredibly lucky, but Celeste was gone.

"Hello?" she croaked quietly. Nothing. Was she the only one who'd survived?

Whatever nervous energy or adrenaline had been keeping her going since the collapse first began washed out of her and she fell back onto her behind and burst into tears. Mia curled into a ball, emotionally drained, and just cried. What had just happened was impossible, but that impossible thing had killed her friend, nearly killed her. The tears ran long and deep until she felt a hand on her shoulder. A voice came from behind her. Soft with an American twinge.

"Are you ok lady?"

Mia looked up. The man in the baseball cap was looking down at her, his huge frame towering above her, blocking out the sun. He was completely covered in blood. The metal bar was gone, discarded as useless.

"Sorry. I was in that pile of dead people," he said, blinking as he tried to brush the blood off his face with his shaking hands. He nodded towards the pile of bloodied bodies where Mia had seen him fall. "Guess I got lucky."

Mia brushed the tears from her cheeks and turned to the body of her friend. The blood had drained from her face, leaving it deathly pale. Her head was framed by a halo of pitch black hair splayed out around her head, slick with the blood pooled under her body. One eye lay open, staring up at her. Mia placed her hand over Celeste's face and closed it. Gently she pulled Celeste's jacket closed, covering the gaping hole in her stomach. Taking a long deep breath, she stood up.

"Friend of yours?"

Celeste was dead. The last thing Mia wanted to do was to talk to this stranger. She looked around. Piles of bodies, no movement, no sound. It looked like they were the only survivors. They might be stuck together for a while, at least until they got down to ground level. Surely the Police or Army would come soon.

"She was," said Mia. "A good friend."

"I'm sorry about that. I'm Bruce. Look, we've all lost people. That pile of bits over there was my cousin. Trip of a lifetime and now look at this shit! I guess what's most important now is us surviving," he said.

"I'm sorry about your cousin Bruce."

"No problem lady. Didn't see him much anyway. Thrown together for this trip. Not my choice of travelling companion. His mom thought I could straighten him out. Doesn't look like that will happen now. She's gonna be pissed. I was supposed to take care of him. Fuck."

"Mia," she took a breath and paused for a second to compose herself. "I'm Mia. Look, it's not safe up here. Why haven't you gone down, got off the platform? Why didn't you leave when it began? Why didn't everyone just leave?" she asked.

"You haven't seen? Wait, were you up there?" He twisted his neck upwards then looked over at the toppled tower. "Whoa. You got real lucky. We can't leave. We're trapped up here. The elevators are fucked and look at the stairs."

Bruce walked over to the remains of the stairwell and stepped carefully down two of the steps.

"Check this out."

The next step he took was forward away from the metal steps and through the air. He stood there seemingly levitating a foot off the ground, the stairs spiralling away underneath him.

"Check me out!" he shouted, jumping up and down.

Mia just stood there gaping at him. He was levitating. It was impossible but he was levitating right in front of her eyes. In the middle of all this it looked like he was doing street magic.

"We can't get down. Whatever is still holding this thing up is blocking the way. It's like that in all the stairwells" he said, stepping back.

Mia ran over to him, trying to feel the air underneath him. Her hands hit something hard. He was standing on a solid surface but it was completely invisible. She leaned close in to see but there really was nothing there.

"I don't understand what has happened. It's all..."

"Impossible? Yeah, I got that. We're trapped on," Bruce looked around for a second, "what I guess is now the top of the Eiffel Tower. Look out there. Look at the rest of the city. It's not just us."

He pointed out to the skyline and Mia looked out over the city again. Huge swathes of Paris were ablaze. Smoke pluming out of uncontrolled fires. The fire was patchy though. In some places the city looked serenely peaceful, not a thing was moving and there wasn't a hint of smoke.

Oh god, the conference! thought Mia. She knew people there. She told herself they might be ok, but it wasn't far away and it was definitely lower down, inside the devastation.

She reached to pull the printout of the invite from her back pocket and felt her phone. Jack, Freddy! She had to let them know she was ok. Whatever had happened had to be on the news. She slipped the phone out and unlocked it. The screen glowed with a picture of her family, Jack with one arm around her and the other holding up a one year old Freddy. Mia jabbed at the phone icon, brought up Jack's number and hit the green dial icon.

Nothing. No signal. Fuck.

Mia waved the phone around in the air but got nothing. The masts must be out. Of course the masts are out, look at this fucking city. Mia glanced at the invite in her other hand.

"Come to Paris. Enjoy the sights. Take in the culture," it said. *Bollocks to that.*

On the back was a map and slap bang in the middle of it was the Eiffel Tower, printed in a slightly off center perspective so you could see the curve of the tower. She twisted it round, using the river for orientation and then held it out, comparing it to the remains of the city in front of her. There it was, Hotel Blanchard, just a long stretch of parkland between her and it. A sign for the hotel was just about visible on the roof. As she looked she saw something, movement. Tiny figures were sat on the roof. Living people! Survivors! Mia tried to shout but they were too far away, even in the eerie half silence of the ruined city.

There really should be more noise, thought Mia. She could see fires and collapsed buildings but there was not a lot of noise at all. No sirens, no alarms. It was weird.

"We should make a sign or something," said Bruce.

He was right. A city this size, with this much damage, rescue was going to take forever. They needed a way to get the attention of any potential rescuers. Mia looked round for something to signal with. Other than steel spikes sticking out of the ground, most of the structure had been pulled away with the collapse of the upper section leaving very little other than the scattered bodies and various backpacks and handbags. There was nothing to work with.

"I don't see how we can..." she started.

"I got it," said Bruce. "You might not want to watch though."

Mia watched in disgust as he began pulling corpses into a line, side by side.

“What are you doing?”

“Just wait.”

He picked up another body and laid it across the first two in the arrangement and Mia saw what he was doing.

H.

Oh god no.

Mia grabbed a discarded coat from the floor and placed it over Celeste, standing guard so Celeste didn't become part of Bruce's gruesome message.

“Done. If that doesn't get their attention nothing will.”

Mia turned back and it was as bad as she thought. He'd spelt out 'HELP!'. Why the exclamation mark? For a horrible second the dot of the exclamation mark looked like a disembodied head. Handbag, thank god.

“Thanks I guess, but I can't be around this,” she said. “I'll have a look around.”

She walked around the edge of the platform. Without the stairs or lifts there was no way down. It was well over three hundred feet to the ground, there was no jumping it. She glanced at her phone again, still no signal. She was going to have to get out of the city if she was going to get in touch with Jack. She could only imagine what he was thinking.

Mia felt a wet squelch under her feet. Looking down Mia saw that she'd stepped into a stream of blood, flowing from Bruce's sign, under her foot and trailing over the edge of the platform. She stepped away but as her eyes followed the stream of blood she stopped. It was dribbling off the platform in a steady flow but she could see hear it hitting something. She ran to the edge and gasped. A few feet below the edge a thick pool of blood had formed, floating in mid-air.

“What the...?”

Mia looked around and saw a pile of information leaflets scattered on the floor. She picked one up and crumpled it into a ball. Arching her back she threw the paper ball as far as she could away from the tower. The ball caught the breeze, turned around and hit her in the face.

New tactic needed. She made a second ball and lobbed it underarm off the platform. It stopped in mid-air a few feet below her, rolling horizontally a few feet before coming to a halt, hovering in the air. Mia moved to the side of the tower facing where she hoped the hotel was and made another ball. The same thing happened.

“It's weird, isn't it?” said Bruce, suddenly appearing next to her.

Mia turned to him. “Bruce, how far can you throw?”

“I've got a decent arm. Why?”

“Start gathering stuff together, anything you can find. We're getting off this fucking thing before it kills us.”

“What about waiting for rescue? What if someone comes?”

"Look, no-one's coming. The whole city is affected." She pointed up to the empty sky. "We'd have seen something by now."

"Ok, fair point. How are we gonna get down?"

"We're not going down, we're going across," said Mia, pointing at the levitating paper ball.

"Shit. How far out does it go?"

"I don't know but looking at the state the city's in I'd say further than we need."

"Okaaaaay. Tell you what. You've got balls," said Bruce, smiling as he started to grasp her idea.

"So I've been told."

Bruce was happy to busy himself collecting pamphlets and other junk to throw off the edge while Mia found a battered long coat and did her best to cover the rest of Celeste's body. She pulled the coat back and gave her a final kiss on the forehead.

"See you," she whispered.

Bruce shouted over to her "Hey, check this out!" He was holding up a backpack with one hand and holding a can of spray paint in the other.

"Who brings spray paint to the Eiffel Tower?" said Mia.

Bruce just shrugged. He'd found a point where the tall wrought iron barrier that stopped idiots jumping off the tower had shattered, leaving a gap small enough for him to reach through with the can. He lay down on the floor, put his arm through the gap and pressed the nozzle. The blue paint settled on the invisible surface in tiny globules, rolling around and splitting and reforming like mercury. For the first time, they could make out the shape of what lay beneath them.

Three feet below the barrier a new surface had appeared, pure blue, the colour of the paint. A paper-thin layer hovering completely still in the air. Bruce waved the can around, spraying the paint in as wide an arc as he could reach. The arc spread out a couple of feet from Bruce's position.

"Looks ok to me, I mean for an invisible force field we're about to walk on. You wanna go first?" said Bruce.

"My idea. I suppose I should go," said Mia.

"Ok. I'll give you a boost," he cupped his hands together to form a step. Mia grabbed hold of his shoulder and put her foot in his hands. She felt herself lifted as Bruce pushed her upwards until the top of the barrier was in reach. Carefully avoiding the sharp metal spikes, she clambered over the top and twisted until her legs were beneath her. The new floor, her target, was still a way below her. She carefully climbed down to the base of the barrier as far as she could and stretched out her legs, trying to reach the surface. There was a gap of about a foot beyond where she could reach. She was going to have to drop onto it. Three hundred feet of nothing lay beneath her and below that the ground where she could see the queue for the tower lifts, frozen in place but peppered with red streaks where one of the moving things had ploughed through the line of standing bodies. If they were wrong about this she was dead. She paused for a second, trying to think of another way to do it. Nope. If Bruce could stand on the barrier near the stairs, then it should hold her weight no problem. Mia held

her breath and let go. Her heart leapt but she landed solidly right in the middle of the pool of spray paint.

The surface seemed sure. There was no creaking, nothing was giving way. She felt nothing but a solid surface under her feet.

"I'm ok. It's holding me," she said to Bruce who was peering at her through the bars.

"I grasped that much. What does it feel like there?"

Mia bent over and touched the surface. It was rock hard, totally unmoving to her touch. She couldn't feel any heat coming off it but it wasn't cold either, almost like it didn't have a temperature. She stood, took another deep breath and stamped with her heel. No sound came back.

"It's solid, but it's strange to walk on, there's no sound. Are you coming down?"

"If you don't mind I think I'll watch you walk on it for a minute first," said Bruce.

"Well chuck me the can then. I'll mark out a bigger area."

"What you the can?"

"Throw me the spray can."

"Oh, sorry. Here." He shoved the can through the gap in the barrier so she could reach up and take it from him. She grabbed it and made a start, spraying the surface with more paint while Bruce struggled to climb the barrier on his own.

"Alright, I'm coming over. Make way."

Mia looked up to see Bruce sat on the top of the barrier, one leg on either side. He smiled and reached out his arms.

Crack.

"What was tha..." said Mia. About six foot away, along the barrier a metal support rod snapped out of its moorings. Bruce wobbled for a second as the barrier shifted underneath him.

Crack.

Crack.

The support rods were breaking all along the barrier. It was coming down. Right on top of Mia. She scrambled backwards, trying to get out of its way. Bruce didn't have the option. He was thrown forward off the fence, landing right in its path. He twisted to face the fence, closed his eyes and instinctively put up his arms to protect himself.

The impact never came. The tension of the fence caught it, the moorings further up finally taking the weight and stopping its collapse. Bruce slowly opened his eyes and let out a deep breath.

"Easy," he said, laughing and pushing himself out from under the fence. He stood up and brushed himself down, stamping his feet.

"This feels like... Like a thing. Like an actual thing, not a force field or anything. It's got texture," he said.

"Mmm, sorry what did you say?" said Mia, lost in her own thoughts for a second.

"Never mind. Let's get going. Where are we going anyway?"

"Hotel Blanchard. There's a man there today, Abraham, a friend. We need to find him. I need to find him." She pointed across the park that surrounded the remains of the tower to the hotel. "It's as near to solid ground as we can get. If we can get anywhere we can get there, it's not far."

Abraham was the one person she could think of who would be able to figure out what was happening. Between his serious papers he'd written a mildly successful popular science book on the oddities of physics. All the weird crap that no-one could quite explain yet. If anything qualified as weird crap that no-one could explain, this was it.

"Not far walking hundreds of feet in the air."

"I'm open to any better ideas. Got any?"

"No," said Bruce, shrugging and pulling his bloodied t-shirt away from his skin. "I wouldn't mind a change of clothes too. I'm not exactly at my best you know." He pulled the bloodied baseball cap off his head. The blood splatter on his face stopped abruptly in a line along his forehead making him look like a strange demonic clown.

"It's a hotel. I'm sure we'll find you something. Maybe even a shower."

"Alright, I'm sold."

They carefully made their way through the sky, spraying a path in front of them and swapping between spraying and keeping an eye out for any sign of the return of the deadly bird things. They were both aware how suddenly and silently the first attack had happened and knew keeping a look out wouldn't protect them but it was impossible not to. Mia couldn't shake the feeling that they could die at any second.

The path they were taking lay parallel to the collapsed top half of the tower lying crumpled on its side. It gave Mia some sense of comfort that at least they might see any more birds coming through the twisted metal remains but she still felt dangerously exposed and the groaning of the metal did little to convince her the tower's remains would stay where they were long term. She also knew it was no protection at all and if the things came back they could only run blindly away. When every step might lead to an impassable wall or a swift plummet to their deaths Mia really didn't want to be running anywhere.

They sprayed and walked, sprayed and walked for an hour. Progress was slow and the path they had been marking was so far featureless and flat. As far as Mia was concerned this was perfect. If the path ended at a sheer drop they'd be back at square one, except in the middle of nowhere and hundreds of feet off the ground with no way down. Behind them the paint was slowly dissipating, rolling away through cracks in the surface. Back at the tower their trail had almost completely drained away.

"What if it doesn't end? What if we pass right over the hotel and keep going?" asked Bruce.

"Then we keep going. It can't go on forever."

"Can't it?"

Mia reached down and sprayed a bit more paint. This time was different. Bad different. The paint splattered against a vertical surface for a second before rolling downwards and pooling in a line at the bottom.

"We've hit something," said Mia. They were only about twenty feet from the hotel roof but images of a ten foot high wall blocking their way flashed through Mia's mind. She was fairly nimble in normal circumstances but this was most definitely not normal circumstances. Worse, maybe they were in a box. Maybe someone had enclosed the Eiffel Tower in a giant invisible box. Why the hell would someone put the Eiffel Tower in a giant invisible box? Alien souvenir collectors? If that was it they'd really fucked up she thought, looking back at the ruined tower.

She nervously moved the spray upwards, trying to find the top. The lip was a two foot high ledge a few inches wide. Mia carefully leant over it and sprayed the can. The flat surface was gone. What replaced it was slanted, tipping off to their right. Small six inch sections appeared to overlap each other.

"Is it me or does this look like roof tiles?" said Bruce.

"If they are roof tiles then everything we are seeing, or rather not seeing, is real, normal stuff, just displaced." Mia didn't sound confident, she didn't feel confident. Any theories were just conjecture at the moment.

"If this is actual stuff, you know, then I think we've been on the flat roof of a long building. It's like there's another version of the world, just invisible. Look at what's happened. Those bird things, the things that killed everyone, that was a normal flock of birds. It's just we couldn't see them," said Mia, not entirely believing what she was saying.

"Bull shit. They cut through us like butter, no way could a bird do that much damage."

"It's like they aren't actually interacting with us, just passing by, merrily ploughing through anything they come into contact with."

"Sorry. Look, whatever's causing this means that they can affect us but we can't affect them. Think about a beach ball but made of concrete. Same size, looks like a beach ball. You can't move it and if it falls on you it's not going to stop. The birds were like that. They probably didn't even know we were there, they just happened to fly right through where we were stood."

"Ok, so don't get hit by invisible birds. We've figured that out already. Why did the tower fall? What's caused that?" said Bruce, nodding his head towards the devastated city.

"Those roof tiles and the birds are the biggest clue we have. Something has caused this bit of Paris to become merged somehow with another place somewhere. Those roof tiles exist somewhere and we're just feeling the effect of them here. We can stand on them. They won't move. Just like the birds. We can't affect them physically. We can't smash them. We could probably walk on a spider web if we wanted, it wouldn't break. I guess when the... whatever it was, something happened to be moving under one side of the tower and damaged the legs. I saw what must have been a car drive into one of the legs. It drove straight through but the tower didn't budge. There must be something in the other place holding that leg up."

"How did you figure all this out." asked Bruce. "You a scientist or something?"

"Yup, physicist. Was, anyway. I'm going back soon. Or I was, I don't know."

"So, did someone do this? Is this deliberate? Russians? Aliens?"

"I'm pretty sure this is beyond anything people could do. Aliens? This would be a pretty big 'Fuck You' for first contact. Natural, no idea."

"Nothing natural is going on here Mia. There's something weird going on and I want out. Let's go."

Bruce hopped over the ledge onto the tiles. His feet immediately slipped out from under him and landed hard on his behind. He cried out as he slid sideways, gathering speed before suddenly toppling off an edge and falling.

That's it. He's dead, thought Mia. They were still hundreds of feet off the ground.

Bruce's fall jerked to a halt nine or ten feet below her. The spray can flew out of his hand, rolled a few inches and then dropped, clattering as it fell hundreds of feet to the ground, hitting unseen obstacles. He groaned and sat up, rubbing his back under the backpack then found himself something to lean against.

"Bruce, don't move! Are you ok?" shouted Mia.

"Nothing broken but the can's gone."

"Shit. We needed that. Try and figure out where you are, have a feel around."

"Check this out!" yelled Bruce. He'd rolled over and was lying flat on his stomach looking down. His arm dangled over the edge of whatever he'd landed on, pointing down at the ground. Mia looked where he was pointing. Below him the grass was peppered with what looked like deep, smeared footprints, each one sunk about two inches into the earth. As they watched more appeared, one after the other, left and right, slowly flattening the ground beneath them, creating a deep path in the earth.

"Hey," yelled Bruce. "Stop. Help!"

Nothing changed.

"I don't think they can hear you. There's no reason they would be able to. If the birds didn't feel us, then they won't be able to hear us either."

Sometimes the footprints would veer off the path underneath where Bruce lay and meander for a while in small loops before re-joining the main route. The spray can suddenly exploded as an invisible foot crushed it, covering it in a bright blue skin that it slowly shed as it carried on its journey.

Bruce was investigating the thing he'd propped himself against. He felt around, tracing the edges with his fingers.

"Gap. I landed on a Gap!" he shouted.

"What do you mean you landed in a gap? Are you stuck?"

"Not a gap, The Gap," he shouted. "It's a sign, like on a shop. Three letters. G," he traced his fingers around the sign, tracing the outline of a large letter G, "A, P. Gap. I think we're on a mall! A mall destroyed the Eiffel Tower. Fucking commercialisation killing off history again eh? Fuck 'em, let's see how they like this." said Bruce, grabbing a few paper balls out of his bag. He aimed slightly above the nearest set of moving footprints and let fly. The ball dropped towards the footprints, landing and rolling into one of the holes. He aimed again. This time about five feet off the ground the ball bounced and then dropped to the floor.

"Headshot!"

The footprints continued undisturbed, giving no indication that their owner had felt the paper projectile.

"Bruce, will you please stop pissing around, they probably can't feel it you know. Be careful."

"Sorry mom."

"I'm thirty two! Less of the mum stuff. Can you get back up?"

"Hang on, I'll have a look." He carefully got to his knees and felt around with his hands, trying to find the edge of the surface he found himself on. Mia watched him trace a square about six foot along each side.

"Looks like you're on a little ledge. Be careful."

"It's not massive. I've got wall on two sides, the sign and everything else is air. I'm gonna stand up and see how high the wall is. It didn't seem that far when I fell."

"Ok, just take care. I wouldn't fancy being up here alone."

"Alone! I'm the one stuck. No way am I jumping down there," said Bruce, slowly standing up.

"Sorry, you're right. How's it looking?"

He felt around the single wall and found the top. He'd only fallen about three feet from the bottom of the tiled slope, Mia floated about ten feet above him.

"I can get back up, but the tiles felt slippery. If I get onto the roof can you reach me?"

"I'll try." Mia grabbed hold of the ledge and sidestepped towards Bruce, getting as near him as possible until she could look directly down at him.

"Grab my hand, I'll try and pull you up."

"Alright," said Bruce. He threw the backpack up to her and reached out, grabbing her outstretched hands. Mia grunted as she strained against his weight, struggling to lift him as he scrambled with his feet to find a foothold on the invisible surface. His foot hit something solid and, working his way around it, he found place he could rest his weight.

"Hold up. I've found something. Let me go for a second."

Mia let go, wincing as the wound in her arm throbbed while Bruce felt around the area where he'd found the foothold.

"Oh, you are fucking shitting me? It's a goddamned ladder!"

"What?!" Mia took a step to her left and waved her hands around in front of her, eventually hitting the curved metal handrails of the top of a ladder.

"You're right, it comes all the way up! Get up here."

Bruce carefully felt for the first rung with his feet. He closed his eyes and felt around for a rung to hold on to. Step by step he made his way up to Mia, not opening his eyes until he tumbled over the top and collapsed to the ground.

"Come on, we have to find a way across this. It's not far." She helped Bruce to his feet and they followed the ledge back the way they had come. Feeling along the ledge they found the apex of the tiled roof a few feet past where Bruce had jumped. It sloped down the same the other way. The collapsed tower presented an impassable barrier to one side and they quickly found the edge to their left. No way down. Onwards it was.

More carefully this time, Bruce clambered over the ledge and straddled the apex, legs resting one on either side of the incline. Feeling in front of him, and really missing the spray can, he inched his way forwards, Mia following closely behind. As they approached the end of the grassy park they had been crossing they got a better look at the devastation the city had undergone. Buildings had half collapsed, one side demolished but the other perfectly intact, the boundaries between destroyed and intact in perfect straight lines. Mia shut her eyes. One hand in front of the other, feel the way, shuffle forwards, repeat. No need to see for any of that.

Three feet away from the roof of the hotel Bruce groaned and came to a halt.

"Why have you stopped? We're nearly there," asked Mia.

"It slopes down here. Serious slope, like I would slide right off and die slope, and I've no idea what's at the end of it. We could get wedged between this roof and the hotel or there could be a pile of invisible spikes, hell if I know. If you want to go, be my guest, but I'm not gonna risk it."

Mia opened her eyes again. The angle of the roof had brought them a few feet below where they were aiming for. Even if they knew what was at the bottom of the slope they were still hundreds of feet in the air and any further descent and they would have no chance of reaching the roof. They sat there, hovering in mid-air, four feet away from the relative safety of the solid, and more importantly, visibly solid roof of the hotel.

All this way for nothing.

"Bollocks!" shouted Mia at the top of her voice.

“Mia? Mia Green?”

Mia looked up, carefully leaning around Bruce’s bulky shoulders to see who had spoken while clamping her legs as hard as she could. A head was poking over the edge of the hotel’s roof, looking at her, a shock of grey hair blowing in the wind.

“Professor Lane?! What are you doing up there? No, wait, never mind. Can you help us? We’re stuck!” shouted Mia, moving quickly from surprise through confusion to hope with a hint of sore bum. They must have looked ridiculous, she thought, floating in mid-air with their legs splayed as if she was straddling a horse. Mia suddenly became very grateful she’d chosen to wear jeans that morning. More heads joined the Professor’s staring at them over the edge of the hotel roof.

“Hello! Do you need some help?” shouted one. Mia sighed but before she could say anything an arm reached out to Bruce. He reached up and grabbed it, dangling as the owner of the arm yelled and grunted, trying to lift him up. There was a pained shout for help and a second arm grabbed him and he was finally pulled up to the rooftop. Mia followed shortly behind, being dragged up by her good arm.

Stepping foot on solid matter for the first time since the tower felt wonderful. Mia bent and touched the ground. The hotel roof was around two hundred feet long. An access door was propped open leading to a dark staircase. The Professor was stood with three other people, a man about the Professor’s age, wearing a sticker with his name scribbled on it in black ink stuck slightly askew on his crumpled and slightly bloody shirt and two women in purple shirts and trousers with little gold badges embossed with the hotel logo and their names, Chantal and Maria. The man was rubbing his shoulders and glaring at Bruce. Mia didn’t envy him lifting Bruce’s bulk. His t-shirt was still wet with blood and had plastered itself to his chest and from what Mia could see most of him looked like muscle.

“Thank you, thank you so much,” gasped Mia.

“Mia, what were you doing? What possessed you?” said the Professor.

“I... we were on the tower. We had to get off.”

“The Eiffel Tower? When it collapsed? Oh my god, we watched it come down! It was horrific. I had no idea you were on it. Was Jack with you? Freddy?”

“No, they are back in Cambridge. I haven’t been able to contact them. I’m here with... I mean I was here with Celeste, my friend. She didn’t make it,” replied Mia, looking around. From their position, they could see a few other groups of traumatised looking people gathered on other rooftops. Not enough though. If this was everyone who had survived, then millions must be dead. The sizes of these buildings, the number of people that must have been in each one. If this is all that was left. How many were dead? Some of the distant survivors waved and shouted in French at the newcomers but most were just huddled together hoping for rescue.

“God, Jack, Freddy! Oh, I’m so sorry Mia” said the Professor.

“Birds got her friend,” said Bruce. “That’s best guess anyway. Killer invisible birds.”

“Birds? What do you mean? How?”

"Flock of invisible killer birds flew straight through her and everyone else. Not pretty. We got lucky I guess," said Bruce.

"Oh no, I hadn't even considered that. I thought we were above whatever it is," said the Professor, turning to Bruce. "I'm sorry, I haven't introduced myself. I'm Professor Abraham Lane."

"Bruce, Bruce Cole," said Bruce, shaking the Professor's hand.

"Bruce? Rather an odd name for someone of your... err..."

"Yeah. I get it Prof. My mom was an Iron Maiden fan and now I'm stuck with it. End of story."

"Abraham, how did you end up on the roof?" asked Mia.

"We were in the conference room watching the live stream when it happened. Most of the people are, er, still down there but Hachiro and I managed to get away. We thought the roof would be safe. I didn't consider birds. We need to get off this roof, find somewhere safe to plan our actions."

"What actions? What can we do?" asked Bruce. "Look, I came along with Mia because she told me you'd have answers. Can you tell us what the hell is going on?"

"I believe I can, somewhat at least. We were here to view a live feed of an experiment by a colleague of mine." He turned to Mia. "James Frankle, the new head of High Energy Physics, he started just after you left to have your baby."

"I've read some of his papers. What did he do?" asked Mia.

"Maybe you should see for yourself. I kept the recording in case... Well I don't know."

Abraham reached into his bag and pulled out a bulky old laptop. Flipping it open he powered it up and opened the recording of the live stream. After a couple of seconds of buffering the video started playing.

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