

Engella

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Illustrated by
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Engella was tired. Too tired to care where she slept. Huddled in an alley, she covered herself in a plastic sheet to keep out of the rain. The torrent continued. Puddles merged into rivers and her clothes were soaked through. Her makeshift blanket wasn't helping. A police drone zipped high above. Darting between the streets, it was probably chasing a thief it had just identified, tracking them with its facial recognition software. Sirens whined and blue flashing lights danced across the metal scaffolding for a moment.

A scraggly cat jumped onto a trashcan, staring at Engella with piercing eyes that reflected light from the street lamps. Reaching out, she clicked her fingers, drawing him over. She stroked his head until he purred. The police drone zipped past again and the cat jumped at the noise and he darted off into the night. This was Engella's fourth night living on the streets of New Shanghai and she hadn't felt this safe for months. The rain slowed, and she breathed a sigh of relief. Finding a comfortable position, she began to drift off to sleep at last.

A few seconds passed before she realised what was happening. The dizziness took hold more slowly than usual, but the feeling of suffocation quickly engulfed her. Her pulse quickened. She froze. The street lamp above her flickered and the space around her began to warp as a dark figure materialised only metres away.

They've found me, she thought.

They were here.

She rolled sideways as an energy blast hit the spot where she was resting. Engella didn't wait to see her assailant emerge from the veil of black smoke. She managed to draw her blaster and directed three bolts behind her. As she ran away, a shock grenade landed in her path. She yelped as the device exploded, showering her with brick and dust. Pulling back her sleeve, she waved her hand over her metal wristband, turning the transporter on. With no time to enter any coordinates, Engella closed her eyes and hoped for the best.

"Shift!" she said.

The device beeped and spacetime warped around her. Her vision blurred and she lost consciousness.

Engella opened her eyes to the sound of crashing waves. She had arrived on a sandy beach, but it was intensely cold. She could see pieces of brick around her. They must have been caught in the portal as she shifted away. The Hunters had never made it so close before. Their attacks were becoming more targeted, finding her location in spacetime with improved accuracy. At least it had taken them several days to find her this time.

Engella sighed. “Still wet.” Rolling onto her back, she gazed at the sky for a moment. The cirrus clouds looked like candy floss. Another freezing wave splashed over her, making her focus on the task ahead.

“Time to move,” she said.

The beach was silent except for the squawks of seagulls hovering on the upwinds. It was late evening, as the sun was low and the sky was turning pink.

Engella dawdled along the sand, her cape catching the wind. She’d loved the beach as a child, going on day trips with her family, building sandcastles and eating ice cream. She saw her mother’s face in her mind for a moment.



“At least the weather’s better here,” she said. “Not in Kansas anymore, that’s for sure.” She smiled as she remembered her favourite holomovie. She always played the little girl with the pet dog while her father was the Tin Man. She reached for her wristband, anxiously checking it was still there, feeling relieved as she touched the cold metal between her fingers. A red warning light flashed, so she clicked the reset button. Engella had never shifted without coordinates before, so she didn’t know what it meant.

Along the beach, a figure came into view. Engella’s neck prickled. She usually tried to avoid people, it was easier that way, but she pined for some human contact. The loneliness had gone on for too long. Using her wristband, she scanned the area to work out which clothes would be most suitable for the place and time. Her real clothes were quickly replaced by a hologram: a grey hooded jumper, black jeans and black Converse trainers. Her white plaited hair was now neatly placed inside a holographic pink bobble hat.

“Retro!” she said.

Getting closer, Engella could see an older woman walking a chocolate Labrador who was splashing through the surf. They eventually met halfway along the beach.

“Good evening, dear,” the woman said, surveying Engella through black spectacles. She was probably in her sixties, her hair curly brown and greying at the roots. She looked slightly red faced and flustered, wrapped up in her winter coat and scarf. The Labrador ran up to Engella, panting and tail wagging, before sniffing her trainers.

“Sorry about Rupert! He loves meeting new people. Don’t often see new folk around here, you see.”

Engella patted Rupert on the head. “It’s okay. He’s very sweet. Where is *here* by the way?”

“Well you’re on Skye, dear. Didn’t you see the sign when you came over the bridge?”

“I didn’t take the bridge.” Engella looked away, not sure how to explain her sudden appearance. Travelling through spacetime sometimes meant appearing in unusual places, which could be hard to explain. Luckily for Engella this spot didn’t have too many people who would notice a girl appearing out of thin air. Engella remembered her Earth lessons. Skye. Could it be the Isle of Skye, Scotland? The woman’s accent certainly sounded Scottish so that made sense. Shanghai to Scotland was only a short trip, especially when going through a wormhole. Folding spacetime made travelling between two points, however far apart, very easy and incredibly fast. Engella was glad she hadn’t ended up somewhere like the Arctic. Now that *would* be cold.

“The ferries haven’t been running for two days, dear. Terrible storms. How did you get here?”

Engella reached out to Rupert again, patting his back until he rolled onto his side, managing to avoid the question.

“Oh, he likes you!” the woman said with a big grin on her face. “What’s your name, dear?”

“Engella.”

“That’s a very pretty name. I’m Annys.”

“Pleased to meet you, Annys,” Engella said politely.

“Not from around here, are you dear?”

The wind started to pick up. Engella shivered in her wet clothes, clothes she knew looked perfectly dry to Annys.

“No, I’m from, erm... far away.”

“You must be freezing,” Annys said. “It’s very late and there are no more ferries. Are you here with your parents? Please tell me to mind my own business, but what is a girl of your age doing alone on the beach at this time of day? You can’t be older than sixteen.”

“I’m fifteen.” She thought for a moment and tried to remember her last birthday. She couldn’t. She often made notes in her diary to keep track of dates but hadn’t been able to recently. Shifting through spacetime made it harder and harder to remember.

“What year is it?” she asked.

“Are you feeling okay? Have you had a bump on the head or something? Well, it’s 1998 of course.”

Seventy-six years. That was the longest jump she had ever made. The further back in time she travelled, the harder it would be to make it home. Engella suddenly felt even more alone and Annys, sensing something wasn’t right, put her arm around her.

“My dear, why don’t you come back to the cottage for a cup of tea? It’s only a few minutes’ walk away.”

Engella almost said no, but then decided it couldn’t hurt to go for a few minutes. It would be good to dry her clothes and warm up properly. Being on the run was all she had known since she was young. She thought about her parents again and how they had become separated in spacetime. This was not a time for feeling sad. It was about time something good happened. She deserved it.

“I suppose it’ll be okay for an hour or so. Yes. Thank you. I’d like that.” Engella walked with Annys while Rupert carried on skipping through the surf, until he had to run as fast as he could to catch up again.



They'd been walking for fifteen minutes when the sun finally disappeared below the horizon. A full moon shone like a white beacon in the evening twilight. Engella marvelled at its beauty, untouched by colonists or mining corporations. Most of the lunar surface had been sold to multiplanetary companies in her time. All she could see from her bedroom window back home were the vast lunar cities; covered in lights.

At the heart of a small wood, they came to a clearing. Engella emerged from behind an oak tree to see a small cottage covered in ivy. A wooden fence surrounded an immaculate garden. Rose bushes enclosed the neatly-mowed lawn.

"Home, sweet home," Annys said as she unlocked the door. The wood burner still had a few glowing cinders trying to hold on. Annys picked up a pair of tongs and placed some coals on the fire. She stuffed in some newspaper and tossed in a lit match. Flames licked about and the paper quickly turned to a mini inferno. The coals began to glow and Engella relaxed as the room warmed.

"That's better," Annys said, closing the door. "You can't stop shivering, dear. Maybe you need to put on something warmer." She left Engella to enjoy the fire for a few moments, before returning with a pile of freshly-ironed clothes.

"Change into these and then we can have a cup of tea together. The spare room is up the stairs, on the left. In fact, why don't you stay for dinner? You must be hungry."

"Oh yes, I'd like that." Engella went upstairs. Switching off her hologram, she changed out of her late twenty-first century outfit into the clothes Annys had provided. She used her cloak to conceal her blaster, and placed them both in a cupboard under the sink.

Engella returned to the warmth of the sitting room and took a few moments to relax. Annys cooked up a meal of smoked haddock, potatoes and broccoli. Engella gobbled it up quickly.

"That was delicious!" she said as she finished her plate. Annys cut a large slice of apple pie for dessert and served it with cream. Engella salivated as it was placed in front of her. She had not tasted anything so good for as long as she could remember. This was real apple pie, made from real apples. Not the synthesised food she was used to in her time.

"It's getting late, dear. I know you don't want to talk about your situation and I'm not going to make you. But do you have somewhere to stay tonight?" Annys said as she cleared away the plates.

"I don't have anywhere, no."

"Okay, well. That's it then. You're staying here. The guest room is already set up. Why don't you go and take a bath? You look like you need to relax!" She smiled and Engella looked away shyly.

Engella thanked her new friend, said goodnight and went to her room. After cleaning up, she lay on her comfy bed and couldn't believe how her luck had finally taken a turn for the better. New Shanghai felt like a very long way away. Then she remembered that it didn't even exist yet. Was there an old Shanghai in this time? She wondered what it was like, imagining the people that lived there, before drifting into a deep slumber. She dreamt of the beach, sandcastles and her parents.

Engella opened her eyes and yawned as the smell of bacon and coffee drifted into her bedroom. Annys was singing and she had a beautiful voice. Engella got dressed and went downstairs.

“Good morning, dear. Did you sleep well?”

“Morning. Yes, thanks. I don’t think I’ve slept that well in a long time.” She thought about her time on the streets of New Shanghai, where she was lucky if she made it an hour before being woken up by something, whether it was a person, animal or, more often than not, a refuse-bot sweeping rubbish from the streets.

Rupert bounded over and licked Engella’s hand. It tickled and she pulled away, laughing.

“I hope you’re hungry. I’ve made bacon, eggs and potato cakes. Coffee or tea?”

“Coffee, thank you.”

Annys poured a cup and passed her a small jug of milk. Engella and Annys sat together and chatted about their favourite old movies. They were excited to discover they both loved *The Wizard of Oz*. Engella finally remembered the character’s name: Dorothy. She loved playing her in the holomovie. She smiled as she remembered her father doing funny voices when they acted out the various scenes.

“I used to watch it with my grandfather,” Annys said, sipping her coffee. Rupert’s ears pricked. He started pacing and growled.

“Oh, shush Rupert. Be quiet, boy!” Annys got up from the table and walked over to Rupert, who was now barking loudly.

“What’s gotten into you?” She patted his back and he snapped at her fingers.

“RUPERT!” Annys said, raising her hand in authority. He whimpered and ran over to the front door, where he continued to bark. Annys followed. She turned just in time to see Engella topple from her chair.

“Engella!” the old woman shouted, managing to reach Engella in time to steady her.

“My head, I feel dizzy...” Engella could feel the sense of suffocation, and a wave of nausea hit her. “You need to get out of here, you need to run.” She looked at Annys with a look of pure terror.

“I can deal with it, whatever it is,” Annys said. A sound from outside caught their attention and Rupert jumped up against the door, barking and growling aggressively again.

“Annys, don’t!” Engella yelled. But it was too late. As Annys approached the door there was a bright flash and a loud bang. The shock grenade sent shards of wood across the kitchen. Annys fell to the floor, while Rupert lay silent under a pile of brick and wood. The smoke settled. Engella could hear her heartbeat. Her breathing slowed as a dark figure entered through the open wound of the doorway.

“You’re a real hard one to keep track of, Engella,” the woman said, narrowing her eyes. She was dressed in a dark robe and carrying a blaster rifle. Engella went straight for her wristband, but it was too late. The Hunter was ready for her, snatching at her free hand before it could turn on the transporter and then binding both of them in yellow cord. She took the device from Engella’s wrist, placed it on the table and, using the butt of her blaster, smashed it into several pieces.

The Hunter pointed the blaster at Engella’s face. “I’m going to enjoy this.”

Terrified, Engella began to cry. She had always known it was only a matter of time before the Hunters found her. She had already prepared for this day. But she should never have come to the cottage. She should never have put Annys in jeopardy. Filled with guilt, tears rained down her cheeks.

“You didn’t think you’d get away from me, did you?” the woman said. “I almost got you in New Shanghai. I was so close, but you slipped away. You’re making me look bad to the company. Well, I finally caught my prey.”

Engella sobbed, before calming herself. She needed to remain calm. “Why are you doing this?”

“Our boss needs you. You should never have tried to run. He always finds people who run. The bad thing for you, Engella, is that he doesn’t care if you’re dead or alive. What’s it going to be then?”

“I, I...” Engella stuttered. She had never been so scared in her life. She looked across at her wristband, damaged beyond repair.

I’m not getting away this time, she thought. Engella closed her eyes and saw her mother’s face. She remembered the beach. The realisation of what was coming hit her. She felt a wave of tranquillity come over her. Peace at last. She was tired of running anyway. She heard the deafening sound as the weapon fired.

And then, silence. Getting blasted at close range didn’t hurt as much as Engella thought it would. Slowly, she opened one eye to see the Hunter lying motionless on the floor. She gasped to find Annys standing there, hands shaking, with Engella’s blaster in her hand. Annys ran over and began to untie her.

“I knew this would come in handy. Glad you’re not very good at hiding things, dear. I lost my own in an accident not long after I arrived. Terribly careless, especially when I knew we were bound to have visitors,” Annys said. “That won’t be the last of them. More will come. We need to get away from here.” Annys grabbed a small rucksack from the pantry. They both looked over at Rupert, who was still and silent. Annys checked his pulse. “I’m sorry, boy.”

“Who are you?” Engella said.

“I’ve been waiting for you. We couldn’t bring you out, but we managed to have your wristband programmed with an override that would bring you here if you shifted without coordinates. They’d have noticed if we changed the primary shift software, so this was the best we could do.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will. You’re a very important person, Engella. I’ll explain everything, I promise. Now, we need to go.”

Annys pulled back her sleeve to show her own metal wristband.

“How is this possible?” Engella said, stunned.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you sooner. I needed to draw out any Hunters on your tail first. I’m your Watcher, Engella. You’re no longer alone, I promise.” Annys filled her rucksack with supplies: two bottles of water, some food from the pantry and some antibiotics. Walking over, Annys placed her arm around Engella then took her hand.

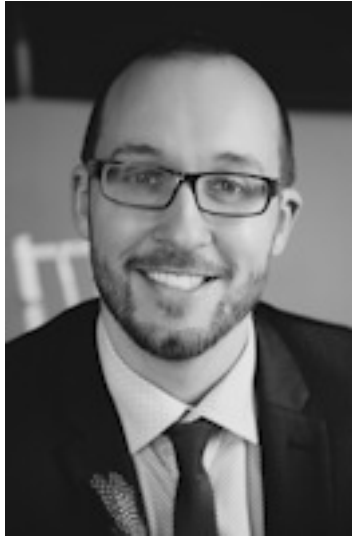
“Hold on tight, this may be a bumpy ride. I haven’t used it for a while.”

For the first time in as long as she could remember, Engella felt truly protected. Safe. Waving her hand over the wristband, Annys said...

“Shift.”

The space around them began to warp. A vibrant aqua wormhole opened up across the room like a crack in an eggshell. The portal engulfed them and they were gone.

About the Author, Paul Ian Cross



Paul Ian Cross is a scientist and children's author from London, UK.

Paul finished his biology degree in 2003 and then started work in clinical research (developing new medicines). He continued studying part-time and he has a Master's degree, a certificate in astronomy and he is currently undertaking his PhD. He very much enjoys his science career but he also has a real passion for writing stories!

Paul hopes to be able to develop a series of books for children and young adults that are both enjoyable and educational. In his spare time Paul loves going to new places. He recently travelled to the Philippines and he also spends a lot of time in The Highlands, Scotland.

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Engella's incredible journey through spacetime continues...

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