

IT WAS A WAR THEY DID NOT CHOOSE
AND AN ENEMY THEY DID NOT KNOW.

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WALLS

A NOVEL

TEO XUE SHEN

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*For those who believed in me despite the odds,
those who inspired me to write and those who may,
in any way, find any part of this novel relatable.*

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PROLOGUE

THE YOUTH RAN across the street, clutching the heavy folds of his raincoat as the rain pelted down mercilessly from above. Behind him, four others followed, each wearing identical raincoats. The youth skidded to a halt at a street corner, waiting for the others to catch up. Lightning crackled overhead, briefly illuminating the faces of the five teenagers.

“I’m telling you, this stinks,” one of the boys muttered. “Not knowing our enemy, not knowing what to expect and most of all, not knowing what we are.”

“Shhh!” the others shushed. “Aracel, that’s enough.”

But Aracel didn’t stop.

“Hey! You’re listening in on us, right?” He turned to a tiny red speck fixed to a lamppost far above their heads, betraying the presence of a camera. “Tell me what the hell is going on. Who the hell are the Savages, really. Go on, tell me!”

The camera merely mocked them in silence.

Aracel snorted and looked away. *Beep. Beep.* The youth, the leader of the squad, glanced down at a tiny screen fastened to his wrist. A cluster of red dots vanished, replaced by one single dot, and it was a couple of blocks down the road. He blinked in confusion. The others looked just as confused.

“The target changed?” one of them asked. “Maybe we should abort?”

The youth shook his head firmly. Changed or not, it was their target.

“We’ll take it.”

He ran along the new route highlighted in green on the tiny screen, his team members following suit with Aracel bringing up the rear, still grumbling unhappily. The rain continued,

bringing visibility down even further for them. The streets were blanketed in a heavy fog. After about 45 minutes of running, the youth halted abruptly. A weather-beaten signboard stood in front of an ominous building: Street 51, it read.

“It’s here,” the youth whispered.

The building was a warehouse. The target was inside. A chain hung loosely around the handles of the door. Someone had apparently gone at it with a pair of bolt cutters just moments before. Exchanging nods with the rest, the youth readied his rifle and pushed the door open. Bright. Twelve sets of lights were glaring down at them. As his eyes adjusted to the sudden glare, a humanoid shape became clear. There was no doubt. It was their target.

“Is that...human?” the youth choked out.

No matter. They had orders. They took aim and fired.

As the bullets left the barrels of their rifles, a hail of deadly lead, the youth watched, enthralled. There was a flash of movement, accompanied by a gust of wind. The expression on the youth’s face morphed into horror when he realised their target was neither dead nor hurt. It wasn’t that the bullets missed. They were the best sharpshooters around. Instead, the bullets buried themselves into the target, whose flesh only sunk in a little. Then, they fell out as useless, pulverised lumps of metal. *Clink. Clink. Clink.*

When the last bullet hit the floor, layers of flesh surrounding the target unravelled. They were wings. No, not wings. Skin flaps. Two semicircular skin flaps extended from each side of the target’s back, from the shoulder blades right down to the pelvis. A long, scaly tail snaked around the target’s legs, rustling as it flexed sinuously. The rest of the target was that of a human male, approximately twenty years of age. Even as the squad stared at it, aghast, its tail whipped forward at breakneck speed, stabbing one of them in the chest. The soldier let out a strangled gasp as blood bubbled to his lips. He was lifted bodily into the air, still attached to the tail, while the others watched,

their eyes filled with terror. With a flick of its tail, the target flung the soldier across the room. *Crack.* Spine snapped. That was it. There were only four of them left now.

They screamed and opened fire once again. The skin flaps simply wrapped themselves around the target’s body, absorbing the impact of the bullets. And then the target leapt. It was impossibly fast. One moment, it was there, the next, it was right behind them. The tail swept around, sending the soldiers flying in four directions. One of them was caught midflight, the target’s hand, with all its fingers flattened out, slicing at his stomach. It was a bad time to realise that the thing had claws too. The soldier’s whimpers became weaker and weaker as he desperately tried to scoop his scattered guts back into the gaping hole in his body.

There was a burst of gunfire. The target let out a guttural howl, leaping out of the way as bullets chased it around the warehouse. Its deadly tail lashed out in the direction of the gunfire. The youth refused to lose his nerve. He stood firm and fired continuously at the incoming tail, watching helplessly as his bullets fell to the ground. At the last moment, a soldier darted in front of him, parrying the tail with her dagger. She swung her rifle around and joined her leader, firing even as the tail retracted. The target, losing its patience, lunged. The soldier threw herself out of the way while the youth braced himself, took aim and opened fire again. This time, the bullets hit the human part of the body and with a screech which could rival that of an insane banshee, the target slammed the tip of the skin flap into the youth. He realised, too late, that it wasn’t completely made out of skin. Rather, the skin was attached to some sort of extended rib. It hit him like a truck, sending him flying into the air.

“Oi, asshole! Over here!”

It was Aracel. At the same time, the other soldier, her rifle mounted on her shoulder and firing away, charged the creature. Thanks to Aracel’s shouting, she lasted five seconds, which

would otherwise have been two. Then, she stopped dead in her tracks, a newly opened slash across her throat. The blood shot forth, making the wall look like an abstract painting. Left with no choice, Aracel took out the lights. He grabbed his leader and ducked under a pile of crates as the glass from the lights showered down. They were plunged into darkness. The creature's silhouette was still visible though, probably due to its size. But miraculously, it seemed to be shrinking and slowing down.

"We have to go!" Aracel whispered.

Too bad, the creature heard him. It spun in his direction. Sensing danger, Aracel threw himself over the youth and felt a sickening *schulpp* as the tail ran through him, twisting and wrenching itself out with an even more sickening *squelch*. There was now a hole the size of two fists in his chest. Without looking, he could tell he was finished. Screaming defiantly, Aracel emptied the rest of his ammunition into the creature.

"Look, it's gonna...lunge soon...I think..." he gasped, slumped over the youth. "Shoot through me...it doesn't know you're here...I'm a goner anyway... Do it!"

The youth's eyes widened in denial, then hardened with resolve. He knew that it was their final chance. If he failed, he would die too. Something warm and wet was pressed into his hand. It was a tiny silver locket, warm and wet with blood.

"My...sister..." Aracel coughed.

His words were blotted out as the creature lunged. The youth opened fire. The creature screamed. Aracel screamed. The youth screamed. Chaos in the dark.

1

I SCREAM MYSELF awake. Or maybe not. I don't know. Could I have screamed or not? White. Black. White. Black. The light above me flickers. The doors are flung open and a woman rushes in. A nurse. She asks if everything's all right. I guess I must have screamed. I nod apologetically, mumbling something about a nightmare. She nods understandingly, muttering some sort of consolation. I wait. Eventually, she leaves, telling me to get enough rest for my discharge tomorrow. Reassignment, really. New unit, new faces, new tragedies. I slump back onto the hospital bed and sleep.

Let's talk about the military. And let's be clear about one thing. There's nothing glamorous about it. No parades for a cheering audience, no grandiloquent firepower demonstrations, nothing. We exist solely for the sake of killing. And one day, we will. Before that, it's boring. Aside from our daily activities, which are printed on paper for us and delivered at four every morning, the rest of the time is ours to spend. Enlistment isn't compulsory. Most of us are picked up from various orphanages around the country. Some are even whisked right off the streets. It's a no-brainer. Given a choice between the military and starving to death on filthy asphalt, few would select the latter. Of course, there are cases of voluntary enlistment too. Don't ask me why anyone would do that to a child.

We are soldiers. And by "we", I mean the hundreds of other 16-year-olds filing silently into the hall while a loud voice booms orders over our heads. The soldiers, nothing more than kids actually, are split into orderly rows and groups.

"NUMBER NINETY-THREE! ROW EIGHT, GROUP FOUR, SQUAD SEVENTY-TWO!"

And that's me. No. 93. No longer an individual, but a number. A number against the Savages. We don't know who or what they are. All we know is that they exist outside the 18 walls which protect our country.

I'm the last to join my group. There are four others, two girls and two boys. They eye me warily, as I do them. A soldier walks onto the stage at the front of the hall.

"Silence!" he yells, even though no one else was even talking to begin with. "The Captain is absent, so his deputy will address you shortly."

The Captain. Our mythical leader. I don't think anyone here has ever seen him in person. But his grip over the soldiers is terrifying. Not a single person would dare defy "Captain's orders".

In time, a short man stalks up to the stage. The deputy. He doesn't need a microphone. His stentorian voice rocks the hall.

"LISTEN UP! CONGRATULATIONS ON PASSING THE FINAL ASSESSMENT OF THE INDIVIDUAL TRAINING STAGE!"

Uncertain mutters circulate the hall. Definitely not a mood for celebration.

"Street 51."

"Annihilated."

"They're dead, aren't they?"

The deputy must have expected a response like that, for he nods solemnly.

"YOU MUST HAVE HEARD THE RUMOURS BY NOW. IT WAS A SAD INCIDENT AND WE WILL FOREVER REMEMBER THOSE HEROES IN OUR HEARTS. WE DO NOT WANT A REPEAT OF THE STREET 51 TRAGEDY!"

My stomach clenches. Just two weeks ago, the final assessment for the individual training stage took place. We were grouped according to strength then. Or rather, killing potential. The strongest, the Elites, were sent on the hardest mission as their final assessment while the weakest were sent on comparatively easier missions. This enabled our superiors to

analyse the strength of the entire batch as a whole. Still, throwing five random soldiers together to complete a mission smells of bullshit. Well, no surprise that tragedy struck. The Elite team, which everyone expected to pass with flying colours, crashed and burned with flying body parts. There was one survivor. One out of five of the strongest soldiers in the batch. In just two weeks, the news had, unsurprisingly, spread throughout the rest of the camp and it became known as the Street 51 tragedy. And now, we're moving on to the group training stage.

"WHO ARE WE?" the deputy roars.

"HUMANITY, SIR!" we chorus.

"AND WHO ARE WE FIGHTING FOR?"

The same response.

"WILL YOU GIVE YOUR LIVES FOR HUMANITY?"

Damn that idiot just won't shut up. We've all been through eight years of this. He knows it too.

"YES, SIR!"

More patriotic drivel. A round of applause. End of speech.

Uniformed personnel stream into the hall, one per squad. Ours is a stout man whose only source of hair on his head is his thick, bushy moustache and equally thick eyebrows. The top of his head shines brightly under the light. I hate him already. He looks like a defective monk.

"Number six, number fifteen, number twenty-two, number seventy-eight and..."

He pauses. Then, his mouth curls into a sneer.

"Number ninety-three," he finishes. "Room seventy-two. Unpack, introduce yourselves and whatever else you need to do. Be up by five tomorrow."

"Yes, sir."

We pick up our belongings, not a lot, really. Clothes, equipment and weapons for the most part. We walk in total silence to our designated room. It looks the same as the rooms we have been assigned to for the past eight years. Five beds, five closets, one toilet with a shower, one table and five chairs.

We pick our beds at random and throw our stuff on the linen sheets. Unpacking can wait. We gather at the table.

“Well, I guess we’ll be working together from now on,” says one of the boys, a grin on his face. “I’m Rick Greenson. Nice to meet you.”

No. 22. He has a large build, one you would expect a rugby player to have. It is a wonder he can even fit into the bed. Chiselled jaw, large eyes. Classic Prince Charming.

“I’m April Chen. Nice to meet you too.”

No. 6. She has a pockmarked face, short hair and very fair skin.

“Sean Ooi. I hope we can get along.”

No. 15. His voice is soft, like the rest of him. A mop of brown hair falls over his eyes, reaching towards his rounded jaw.

Next is my turn.

“Ren,” I say.

They stare at me expectantly.

“What?” I ask.

“Just Ren?” Rick says.

I nod. Then, I remember.

“Nice to meet you,” I continue with a smile completely devoid of warmth.

I probably look like a defaced mannequin. Rick doesn’t look happy with my introduction, but he forces a smile and turns to the remaining member of Squad 72.

“Raine,” she says.

Her voice is hoarse. That’s it. That’s where her imperfections end. Tanned, waist-length brown hair and stunning blue eyes. It’s disconcerting how she’s managed to retain such a complexion as a soldier.

Rick doesn’t object. Doesn’t push her for more either. Perks of having good looks, I guess. Rick opens his mouth to speak, but she beats him to it.

“Make a move on me and I’ll ram your balls down your throat. Girls shower first. No peeping. I’ll get along with you, not the

other way round. Got it?”

Her eyes are hard. The only answer she wants is a yes. She won’t settle for less. So I stare at her blankly while the rest nod their heads in unison.

“Ren?” she says pointedly.

With an attempt to smile, which resembles a grimace more than anything else, I nod.

With introductions over, we unpack and change out of our uniforms. Raine disappears into the toilet only to reappear later dressed in a T-shirt and shorts. Very short shorts. I look away before she catches me staring. Rick isn’t so lucky. He isn’t very smart either. Before he even finishes whistling, Raine’s heel smashes into his right temple, knocking him to the ground. He gasps and slides back on his ass, narrowly avoiding her foot, which slams down between his legs.

“Hey, enough.”

I can’t bear to watch any further. She fixes me with a cold glare.

“Shut up, asshole. You gonna report me?”

“No. But you’re noisy. If that monk catches you, we’re all in for shit so pipe down a little.”

She raises an eyebrow. Almost smiles but catches herself before she does.

“That monk...”

Slowly, she lifts her foot and steps back. Rick, a look of relief on his face, breaks out into a brilliant smile.

“You know, I don’t dislike that part about you.”

Idiot hasn’t learnt his lesson. Raine glances at me, then sighs.

“Piss off.”

She strides towards her bed, sits down and begins cleaning her rifle. Rick beams at me as if we’ve become friends over it.

“She’s a feisty one, ain’t she?”

“Piss off,” I say.

2

ON THE FIRST DAY of training, after an entire morning of static exercises, we're herded to a hill, just a couple of kilometres away from the campsite. Of course, we're made to run the entire distance. With ten kilograms of weight strapped to our backs. And a sadistic monk on our tails.

The monk has a name. It's Idphor, a synonym for sadistic asshole. He drills us daily. Team building, he calls it. Push-ups, sit-ups, obstacle courses and many others. And of course, to make sure we get to know one another as a team, our quotas are set as squad quotas. Meaning instead of a hundred push-ups per person, it's a thousand push-ups per squad. If the quotas aren't satisfied, then our hunger isn't as well.

Sean and April are weak. There's no other way to put it. April's strength lies in communications. She can operate a radio, a GPS or any other piece of mechanical equipment like no other. She's just not suited for the battlefield. On the other hand, searching for Sean's strength is like searching for warmth in Raine. Non-existent. He isn't strong like Rick or good with communications equipment like April. Worst of all, he doesn't have the guts to kill. Not even practice targets.

That leaves Raine and me. The combat-oriented part of the squad. Also the most problematic. And the ones Idphor hates the most. Well, me, mostly. Raine's got her killer looks. Meanwhile, I've got an attitude. To Idphor, we're pieces of shit. Sacks of shit. Bottles, lumps, heaps of shit. That's how he addresses us anyway. And by our numbers too.

Within minutes, it becomes painfully apparent that April and Sean can't keep up. Sean's mop of hair is plastered to his face. It's a wonder he can even see. We slow our pace slightly, much to

Idphor's annoyance. Even more to his annoyance, Rick begins talking to Raine. Apologising for yesterday. She shrugs him off.

"Shut up, you bundles of shit! If you can talk, then you can jolly well run faster!" Idphor screams.

"Screw you, Greenson," Raine mutters under her breath.

She looks like she could happily murder him. The torturous run ends at the foot of the hill. Our task is simple. Get up on this side and down from the other.

"Pass me your load," I hiss to Sean.

Somehow, he's faring even worse than April. That's a healthy dose of mortal embarrassment to think about. He tries to argue, then looks at the hill, gulps and concedes. Rick offers to help April, but she refuses. We begin. The ascent is tougher than it looks. By the time we get to the top, sweat is cascading out of our pores. The descent is worse. Lengths of barbed wire have been set up at knee level, forcing us into a crawl. Within minutes, the rough ground skins my elbows and knees.

"Ninety-three! Just what do you think you're doing?" Idphor yells. "Trying to be a hero, aren't you? Helping others? How many deaths do you want on your conscience?"

He steps over and kicks me squarely in the ribs. My head jerks upwards, catching briefly on the barbed wire. Pain flares. Unsatisfied, he plants his foot savagely on my back, forcing me to the ground, which grinds at my skin with even greater force. Sean tugs urgently at my uniform. I shake my head, grit my teeth and crawl.

"Being smart with me, aren't you?" Idphor sneers. "You want another Street 51?"

"No...sir!" I gasp.

It's almost become a threat. Another Street 51. Eventually, we make it down the hill. We being Idphor and I. The others have reached far ahead of us. Oh, and Sean, who remains faithfully beside me throughout the entire exercise, even though that means spending a longer time on his knees and elbows, dodging barbed wire.

Mercifully, lunch comes next. Food goes down quickly and it's back to Room 72 for a short rest with whatever remaining time we've got. April and Raine shower, which means no time for the rest of us to do the same. Not that I'm complaining. I don't have the energy. I sit on the ground beside my bed, flipping my butterfly knife open and closed methodically. The shiny black casing catches under the light as it whirls about in my hand like the wings of a mantis in flight. I like that knife. It's fun and deadly at the same time.

"Hey."

I look up. It's Sean, his hair swept clear of his eyes for the first time. With a start, I realise he has heterochromia. One eye is blue while the other is a startling shade of green.

"What?"

He eyes my knife warily so I stop flipping it and place it on the bed.

"Uh...thanks for just now."

"Forget it," I wave him off. "Wouldn't be good to die on the first day."

"Mind if I take a look?"

"At what?"

He motions to my elbows. The blood flow has stopped, but they're still feeling rather raw. I shrug in response. Pulling a sachet of saline solution and a crepe bandage from his pockets, he proceeds to dress the wounds.

"What about yours?" I ask.

"I'm fine, thanks to you."

He smiles a little. I'm beginning to get why he hides his eyes. They're slightly unnerving, especially when he's smiling.

"I guess I should be thanking you this time," I say.

Sean shakes his head.

"It's only because of me that you're like this."

"Whoa, what do we have here? Some nice guy talk going on?"

Rick pops his head out from behind the door. Great, Prince Charming's here. I thought I'd successfully ditched him in the

dining hall. Still, he did offer to help April just now, so I guess he's not a bad person. Probably just exceedingly irritating.

"Any of you ever had a girlfriend?" he asks slyly.

"Is that all you ever think about?" I shoot back.

"Why not? What else is there anyway? We're stuck here for, what, months? Years? Might as well think about the good stuff. Like Raine," he adds.

"You're gonna get those balls fed to you one day," I caution.

"It ain't worth it," Sean agrees, nodding seriously.

Rick howls with laughter.

"You know, I was worried how you two'd turn out, but I can't say I'm disappointed. I think we'll make good friends."

I stare at him impassively. It's hard not to return his radiant smile. Then, he claps me hard on the back and I feel like killing him all over again.

After lunch comes hand-to-hand combat practice. We're brought to a room with four padded walls, quite like an insane asylum, and told to pair up with someone of similar capabilities. The remaining person will square off with Idphor. Sean and April immediately pair up. That figures. Rick begins searching for Raine, who quickly grabs me by the arm and hauls me aside.

"We're pairing up," she announces.

I don't remember having a say in the matter, but hey, she's a hell of a lot better than Idphor. Raine looks happy. After all, it's the only time she can legally beat me into a bloody pulp. My mind runs through the things I've done to offend her. First, not reply to her question. Second, stop her from crushing Rick's balls.

Idphor barks an order and we begin. Raine's eyeing me like a hungry shark homing in on a dead seal. Without warning, she lunges, kicking my legs out from under me. I fall. She plants a knee into my stomach, driving the wind out of me. I bring my arms around my head, prepared for the flurry of blows, which does not come. Instead, she leans forward and hisses in my ear.

"What do you know about Street 51?"

I blink.

"What?"

"Street 51," she prods, twisting her knee deeper into my abdomen.

"What makes you think I know anything more than you do?"

"Idphor asked you just now, didn't he? Whether you wanted another one. Another. One."

She digs her elbow into my sternum for extra emphasis. In response, I buck wildly and throw her off. We get to our feet and glare at each other.

"You're overthinking it," I say. "That piece of scum was just using it as a threat."

"Really?"

She lunges again; this time the heel of her foot comes flying at my temple. The same move which took Rick down. I block it with my elbow and lash out with my other arm, hoping to catch her off balance. She seizes my arm, taking me out with a flying triangle choke.

"What's with you and Street 51 anyway?" I gasp, struggling out of the choke.

"None of your damn business," she replies. "You've been holding back on me, haven't you?"

"Kinda," I shrug.

"Don't."

Her expression is hard. One of those don't-look-down-on-me faces. Very slowly, she reaches into the pocket of her uniform and draws out a switchblade.

"If you won't get serious, I will," she warns.

She gives me approximately two seconds to decide before attacking me with the blade. I block her at every turn. Or rather, my body blocks her blows instinctively. Eight years of training has gotten me this far, where going against an armed attacker just doesn't faze me any more. It seems to piss her off, though. Her attacks get faster and fiercer, until I begin to seriously hold a certain concern for my own safety. Fortunately, she runs out

of steam and we break apart, panting heavily. It is then that I realise everyone else in the room is staring at us.

“Number seventy-eight,” Idphor finally says.

I can’t tell if he’s disgusted, proud or appalled. Or all three.

“Yes, sir?”

“You’re cleaning up the armoury after this as punishment for turning your weapon on number ninety-three.”

“Yes, sir!”

Raine looks as though she’s getting her teeth ripped out.

“That’s it! You’re all dismissed! Get out!”

We file out in silence. I turn to Raine. She’s furious.

“Look, I’m sor...”

She walks away. Damn unreasonable git.

“She’s cold, huh?” Sean remarks.

She’s cold all right. About as cold as a block of ice. Probably colder.

“It might be something we’re not getting,” April disagrees. “A reason or something.”

It’s the first time I’m hearing her speak since the introductions. She’s been getting along pretty well with Sean, since both of them are, you know, similar. Physically similar. I’ve seen her speaking to Raine, although not for long. Amongst us, she’s the one who’s had the most amount of contact with Raine.

“Whatever,” I mutter, unwilling to discuss Raine any longer. “Let’s just go.”

“Hey, but Raine aside, that was amazing!” Rick exclaims, barging in between Sean and me. “How did you...you know, those moves! Man, they were sick!”

My willingness to discuss things drops even lower. I shake my head and remove his arm from my shoulder.

“Practice.”

“Teach me,” he presses.

“They gave us an instructor for a reason.”

“Idphor?” Rick grimaces. “He keeps going on about basic footwork and form.”

“Then get those right.”

April and Sean have fallen behind. They might have expected things to turn nasty and were giving us room to slug it out. Well, sorry to disappoint you both, but I’m not about to get Idphor on my case as well. Better lie low for as long as possible.

“Come on,” he pleads.

Then, seeing the expression on my face, he hastily comes to a compromise.

“All right, if I get my footwork and form in order, will you teach me then?”

That’s the best I’m going to get from him. And if that’s the best I’m going to get, then so be it. I don’t have the energy to argue any more. I accept.

Raine’s not in our room by the time we return. Sighing, I grab a rag from my pile of belongings and head down to the armoury. I guess I feel guilty for what happened. She’s already there when I arrive, violently pushing a mop across the floor with considerable force. She glares at me when I enter, sending me into almost immediate regret over my decision to help her.

“I don’t need your pity,” she snarls.

“I’m not here to pity you,” I snap. “I’m here to help.”

“Why?”

I ignore her and begin to wipe down the shelves. The armoury is a large building containing an even larger amount of weapons. The weapons are well maintained, but the building itself is not. Idphor must be insane, expecting one person to clean the entire place.

“Why?” she repeats like a broken tape recorder.

“Because.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Look, why don’t you just shut up and mop the damn floor or you won’t be getting out of this place anytime soon,” I suggest.

“Because.”

We stare at each other. Then, very slowly, she breaks into a smile. I laugh too. I can’t help myself.

“All right, fine, have it your way,” I give in. “Call it guilt.”

“You know, when shit goes down, you’re gonna be the first to die. Cause of that guilt.”

I look her in the eye.

“I sure hope so,” I reply seriously.

She frowns, unsure whether to laugh or not. The silence drags and becomes too awkward for either of us to speak so we get back to cleaning. Even with two people, it soon becomes clear we won’t be finishing anytime soon, nor will we be having any dinner today. Idphor, that bastard, must’ve known this. We’re saved from imminent starvation when the door to the armoury bursts open and the rest of Squad 72 enters.

“There’s really no need...” Raine begins.

“Just let us help,” April says softly. “The faster we get this over with, the more time we have to relax, no?”

Raine doesn’t argue any further. That’s a first.

IDPHOR’S BOOT PRESSES harder into the back of my head. I gasp as my mud-caked face is shoved even further into the suffocating sludge.

“Keep your head down! You wanna get shot?” Idphor roars.

“No, sir!” I yell in reply. My eyes say, *Go take a shit, asshole.*

We’re all in a field, sprawled face first in the mud, crawling forward towards a set of targets. I chance a look at my rifle and grimace in disgust. It’s caked in mud. I’m barely even keeping it from jamming. Idphor takes his time to scream at the lot of us, particularly me, before he finally disappears somewhere to take a shit or something, leaving us with twenty targets to blow straight to hell. We wriggle forward until we’re within thirty metres from the target. And then we fire. There are four targets per person on average. I clear mine, then lower my rifle and observe the rest.

The four targets in front of Raine are down. Rick is the next to clear his. April has two down, but is struggling to hit the other two. Sean is, well, I don’t really wanna talk about it. But just to give you an idea, he’s emptying clip after clip of ammunition in the general direction of the targets, his eyes tightly shut. Raine catches my eye, her expression telling me that if I don’t do something about that real quick, she’ll happily stab him right then and there. I raise my rifle. I don’t even bother using the scope. There’s no point when we’re this close to the targets. I fire four times and that’s it. Sean’s targets are down. By the time Sean opens his eyes, all he sees are the pieces of his targets. I sneak a glance at Raine. She’s still glaring at me. Looks like that wasn’t what she wanted me to do. That girl probably wanted me to stab him instead.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

At 19, **TEO XUE SHEN** is currently the youngest author longlisted for the Epigram Books Fiction Prize since its inception in 2015. He is a sergeant in the Singapore Armed Forces after graduating from Hwa Chong Junior College. He is also a fishing and trekking enthusiast, scoutmaster and avid reader. Xue Shen started writing *18 Walls* before he enlisted, and his experience in the Armed Forces has informed and shaped his debut novel.

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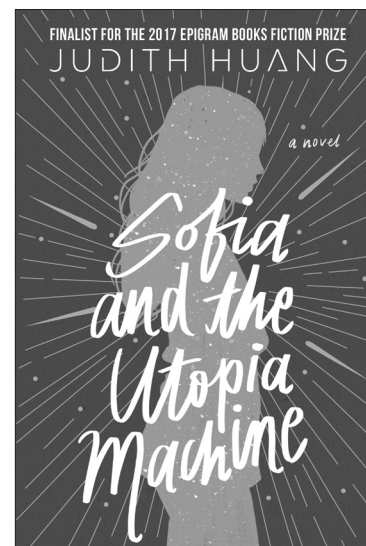
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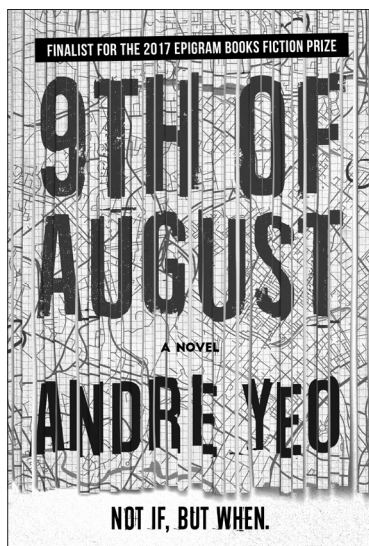
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