

The background of the cover is a dense, circular arrangement of hands in various shades of yellow and orange. Each hand is rendered in a simple, stylized line-art style. Many of the hands have distinct black tattoos: some feature a cross, some a starburst, some a dagger, and others a snake or a hexagonal geometric pattern. The hands are positioned as if they are all reaching towards the center, creating a sense of unity and collective effort.

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EPIGRAM
BOOKS
FICTION
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2020

CHILDREN OF THE ARK

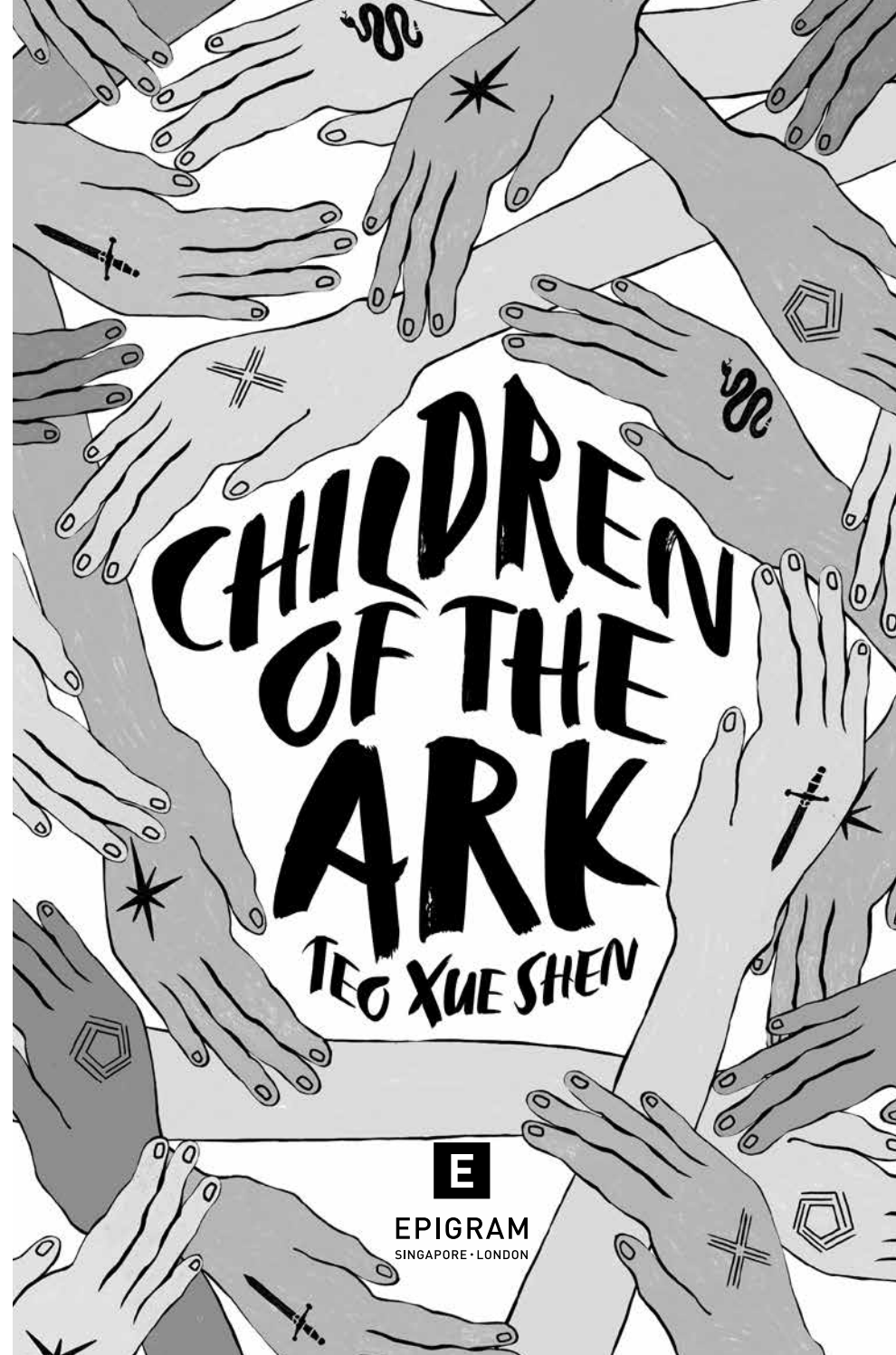
TEO XUE SHEN
AUTHOR OF 18 WALLS

CHILDREN
OF THE
ARK

ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

18 Walls

(longlisted for the Epigram Books Fiction Prize 2017)



EPIGRAM
SINGAPORE • LONDON

*For those who inspire, those who are inspired
and those who may, in any way, find this novel relatable*

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Author photo by Joanne Goh
Cover design by Priscilla Wong

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Published in Singapore by Epigram Books
www.epigram.sg

Published with the support of



National Library Board, Singapore
Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Name(s): Teo, Xue Shen.

Title: Children of the ark / Teo Xue Shen.

Description: Singapore : Epigram Books, 2021

Identifier(s): OCN 1200187260

ISBN 978-981-49-0144-4 (paperback) | 978-981-49-0145-1 (ebook)

Subject(s): LCSH: Bildungsromans. | Imaginary wars and battles—Fiction.

Classification: DDC S823—dc23

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the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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First edition, January 2021.



Zan's Guide to Wildbeasts

Chymeleo

A four-headed chameleon-like wildbeast with four limbs on both sides of its body. Ray calls it "undimensional". I call it "creepy".

Cumulopanthera

A panther-like wildbeast with six tails, each with a sickle-like claw jutting out. Highly territorial. If you see one, run.

Cylindrip

A bright blue plant-like wildbeast with cylindrical stalks ending in furry heart shapes. Don't cut one open, unless you want a horrible stench to follow you around.

Dracollian

A multicoloured dragon-like wildbeast with four leathery wings and six eyes. It has the ability to belch fire and water separately. Ray has one as a pet, so they are gentle.

Dromedius

A emu-like wildbeast with a razor-sharp beak. It uses spindly projections on its neck to cling onto rocks while its single bulbous eye searches for prey. I hate them. So. Much.

Gastrynite

A nudibranch-like wildbeast that crackles with electricity. It possesses barbed tentacles sprouting from its back. Kinda looks like a slug.

Hylzaghen

An ugly boar-like wildbeast with long, curved tusks and a huge maw on its underbelly. Makes an annoying screeching noise.

Imperatus

A cave scorpion-like wildbeast with an impeccable ability to sense the vibrations in the air. It has ten clawed legs and a bulbous tail laced with deadly venom. If you're stung, you'll have roughly six or seven years to live. Some advice from Ms Xuan: Avoid at all costs.

Istigoad

A squat and tailless eight-legged water cat that can walk through liquids.

Khacropettes

A giant snakehead-like wildbeast with conical teeth and pink projections above its armour-plated head. The projections have tiny mouths and teeth of their own.

Pangasimus

An underground plant-like system with numerous red stalks aboveground. Each stalk has the ability to grow a fish-like maw crammed full of sharp teeth. Vicious.

Pentagone

A multicoloured orchid-like wildbeast with neon green stamens. Its only nourishment are the bodies of Pentagons. You'll find them in the Pentagon Cemetery.

Sarcoptermuraen

A giant bipedal lizard cloaked in armour plating. Its jaws are split into eight sections and it has a second set of jaws located in its throat. Human-like hands sprout from its back. Ms Xuan's worst enemy.

Scorpaeroi

A round, frilly wildbeast that exudes a glittery substance. Playful, we think.

Trygonotoro

A stingray-like wildbeast that is able to glide on walls and ceilings. It has a venomous spine on its tail and a horrifying mouth on its back.

Ursthibet

A bear-like wildbeast that moves in a pack. It has two heads and six limbs.

Veranator

A skeletal crocodile-like wildbeast whose bones are held together by a thin membrane. It has no legs and wriggles instead of walking. They've got tenacious jaws (trust me, I know this firsthand).

ONE

I HATE PENTAGONS. They're probably not the pentagons you're thinking of right now. These Pentagons are dangerous. Deadly, even. Just thinking about them makes my throat constrict with disgust.

"Zan! Look out!"

I twist around, parry the blade of a sandy-haired boy and kick him in the stomach. He grunts, doubling over before quickly straightening up. He slashes at my neck. I bring my dagger sharply downwards, catching the edge of his knife. I strain against him, but he's stronger than I am. I wince. Not good. If he were a Pentagon, I'd be dead by now. He forces my dagger back and I simply allow it, letting him think I'm getting tired. When the blade gets too close to my face, I duck. At the same time, I toss my dagger towards my free hand. As the boy's blade whistles harmlessly over my head, my dagger lands snugly into the palm of my left hand. His eyes widen when he realises that he made a fatal mistake.

"Stop!"

We freeze. My dagger is barely a centimetre from his throat. There's a brief moment of silence. Then, the entire room erupts in cheers.

"Zan!"

I'm smothered in a hug from a tall, dark-skinned girl. Within minutes, more girls join the party and I'm hoisted onto their shoulders.

“All right, all right, calm down,” yells a burly man with a whistle hanging from his neck as he motions for us to settle down.

“He’s right,” I say to the elated girls as they set me down. “I didn’t do anything special.”

“Nothing special?” the tall girl protests. “You beat the champion of the boys’ section!”

“Rani,” I say. “Come on. It’s just a fluke. I got lucky.”

The whistle sounds twice, signalling the end of the session. Ben, the burly man, comes over. He’s our trainer for close-quarters combat. Stocky, muscular and way faster than you’d expect, he drills us daily on the basics of hand-to-hand combat. In fact, this fight was his idea all along.

“Good job,” he says, clapping me on the back. “You’ll make an excellent Tracker.”

“Thanks.” I smile, but my throat feels dry. “I’ll be off now.”

“Yeah,” he nods enthusiastically. “Don’t be late for your next class!”

I slip out of the room as quickly as I can, narrowly dodging the fan club I just created. Rani is hot on my heels, her jack-o’-lantern grin lighting up her deep-set eyes. Lean, athletic and a full head taller than I am, she keeps pace with me easily. On the back of her right hand is the red mark of a star. Right, I mentioned the Pentagons earlier. Every person is born with a single red mark, or *sierg*, on the back of the right hand. There are four safe ones, namely, the Star, Cross, Dagger and Snake. But the Pentagons, they’re different. They are not human. Trust me, they aren’t.

“That was no fluke, Zan,” Rani says. “There’s no need to be humble about it. You were great!”

“I told you. I got lucky,” I say, rolling my eyes. “He was stronger.”
“Ben doesn’t think so.”

“Ben wasn’t the one getting slashed at. Besides, I don’t even want to be an *excellent Tracker*. I just want to serve my time and get out of here. The way these people go on about the Pentagons... it’s disgusting.”

“Come on,” she says lightly. “You’ll have a lot more friends if you’d just...”

“Don’t need them,” I mutter offhandedly, rounding a corner and slowing my pace. “You’re more than I can handle.”

She pulls a face. We take the lift up to ground level. Grey skies greet our eyes. Silhouetted against the weak glare of the setting sun are the whitewashed walls of our facility. Four large cylindrical pillars form a square, their conical red rooftops pointing skywards like upturned ice cream cones. Joining each pair of pillars is a slab of concrete adorned with lacquered glass in various colours. On one wall, the front, is a cross. A church. At least that’s what this facility is on the surface. Beneath the ground, however, is a different function. This is ARK.

Rani and I are part of an underground organisation—literally and figuratively—that takes in orphans like us, educates us and provides us with our daily necessities. In exchange, we are bound to ARK for five years after that.

ARK has seven levels below ground and two levels above it. Each day consists of two parts. The first being vocational training which, like the class we just sat through, prepares us for the roles we’ll take on during our five years of bonded service. The second half is proper education, which prepares us for what comes after—for what comes when we’re finally *free*.

“Clear skies again today, huh?” Rani comments wryly, then sighs. “How long has it been?”

I glance up, despite knowing that for the past seventy-eight years, the skies haven’t changed at all. They’re grey as ash.

“Lost count,” I reply, lowering my head. “But I do know that I’ve been here for six whole years. The end is near.”

“As if,” she snorts. “You’re only halfway there.”

“Nah. Five years of bonded service will pass by in a flash.”

“You wish.”

“Just let me dream.”

“There are still four digits on your release counter.”

I glare at the electronic bracelet on my wrist—1,857. The ugly neon-blue numbers glare back at me from their digital interface: 1,857 days to freedom.

“Just. Let. Me. Dream.”

“Fine, fine,” she says, laughing. “Hurry up a little or we’ll be late.”

“Easy for you to say. You’ve got long legs.”

We exit the lift, which brings us to the courtyard. This part of the building is separated from the main church hall by double oak doors that are always locked, denying unauthorised access to the outside world. I haven’t been out in years, but I’ll assume life outside hasn’t got better. Imagine a city interspersed with unsightly pitch-black rectangles, a metropolis of decrepit buildings and a kaleidoscopic wedge of humanity watched by hawkish soldiers. That’s how I picture it, at least.

Rani jogs over to the far wall and runs her palm over the worn bricks. She depresses a couple. With a rumble, the entire wall swings open, revealing a spiral staircase beyond. Light bulbs mounted on the wall give just enough illumination to make out

the first few steps. As we ascend, the wall swings shut behind us, sealing us in. The staircase seems to go on for ages before it finally opens up into a long corridor. Classrooms line the corridor. This is where our theoretical lessons are conducted. We find our classroom and slip in, hoping the teacher won’t notice. No such luck.

“Got stuck dealing with your fans, Zan?” A sharp voice rings out.

Eighteen pairs of eyes turn to our position against the back wall. The owner of the voice is a wiry, austere woman, whose age is only betrayed by the silvery hair on her head. She has a Snake sierg. I wince. Fans, ha. If they knew me, they’d probably distance themselves quickly.

“Kinda.” I shrug, pretending not to be bothered by her remark. “Ben set me up with Jasper.”

A murmur ripples through the class. I swear I see money change hands.

“All right,” Ms Xuan says, clapping her hands loudly. “Sit down. We’ll carry on with the lesson. Flip to page fifty-seven of your books.”

Her stern gaze quells any further discussion about the fight. Rani and I slide into wooden stools at the back of the class.

“As I was saying,” Ms Xuan continues. “The Imperatus. It’s a solitary wildbeast. Since it has neither eyes, ears nor nose, it navigates mainly using the vibrations in the air. Encountering such a creature is highly undesirable.”

I glance down at my textbook. A sketch of a scorpion-like creature stares back at me. Definitely undesirable. My stomach flops. I don’t know what I’d do if I ever met one of these things.

“Avoid it at all costs. The venom in the tail is slow acting, but deadly. If stung, you’ll have roughly six or seven years to live, during which you’ll be completely fine until you drop dead one day. Which is why, I repeat, you should avoid this wildbeast at all costs.” Ms Xuan holds up her hand, with her second, third and fourth fingers straight and the middle finger slightly bent. “If you have the misfortune of chancing upon one of these wildbeasts, make a sign like this instead of speaking out loud. Trust me. It could save your life.”

No one doubts her. The glow in her left eye and the deep scar marring her right speak volumes about her credibility. She’s a retired Tracker, one who’s served ARK all her life. In fact, even now, I think she’d rather be slaying wildbeasts than teaching pubescent teenagers.

ARK has one purpose: the rescue of mistreated Pentagons using the Forbidden Paths. The series of tunnel-like pathways many kilometres beneath the surface of the earth were discovered over a hundred years ago. And what do we know about them? Next to nothing. We know that the laws of science don’t apply down there. We know that they’re inhabited by hordes of creatures known as wildbeasts. We also know that many of these Forbidden Paths lead aboveground where their openings appear as inky rectangular doorways. That’s it. That’s all we know. Trackers trained by ARK are paired up to venture into these pathways and retrieve vulnerable Pentagons. Kinda like human trafficking, if you think about it, just a little riskier.

“I still don’t get it,” Rani sighs after the lesson. “Why do we have to use the Forbidden Paths? I mean, look at this scorpion thing. What could warrant coming face to face with something

like that? Can’t we, like, I don’t know, disguise ourselves and use surface streets?”

“And risk getting found out?” I snort. “No way. You know how the government is. Anything to do with saving the Pentagons warrants execution. They’ll chop your head right off and feed it to the dogs.”

“Yeah, right.”

“It’s true. Okay, maybe not the dogs part. But we both know that it’s a serious crime to even be in contact with a Pentagon. I hear they’ve increased the number of soldiers on patrol.”

“They didn’t have to go that far.”

“I don’t blame them,” I say as we get into the lift with other trainees to go down to the basement levels. “The Pentagons are deadly. They need to be culled.”

“Zan.”

The others stare at me. I ignore them. This is something I’m used to. People usually admire me until I open my mouth. Then, they hate me. I don’t even feel indignant about it anymore, just tired resignation. We stand on opposite sides of a chasm. There’s no bridging this gap.

“It’s true.”

“Come on, they’re just people who—” one of the boys begins.

“Started the Sierg War seventy years ago,” I interrupt. I’ve seen him around before. His name is Sung Jun or something, I think. He has a Star sierg and is one of those people I haven’t really spoken to, even if it has been six years. You know, the type whom you share a first glance with and mutually decide that you belong on different frequencies.

“And they wiped out half of Singapore while they were at it,”

I continued. “They’re as destructive as the wildbeasts when the Paths first formed.”

“You can’t just—”

“Sure, I can. Because it’s true.”

“You—”

Ding! The lift doors slide open at B1, saving me from whatever lecture the boy was about to give me. He and the others exit, frowning as they go. A tingle of irritation presses my lips into an exasperated line. We definitely belong on different frequencies. Rani sighs. She doesn’t have to speak. Her sigh tells me everything. We proceed to our room, where the two of us have lived for the past six years. Trainee accommodations are on B1 and B2. Levels B3 to B6 are training facilities and other areas. And finally, there’s level B7. The entrances to the Forbidden Paths.

“What’ve we got next?” I ask, opening my cupboard door.

The room is small and cramped, its furniture comprising two cupboards, one bunk bed, one table and two chairs. There are communal toilets and showers down the hallway. A mirror hangs on the door of my cupboard. A pair of large, tired eyes stare back at me, accompanied by small, pale lips which turn downward slightly but naturally. I guess I look intense most of the time. Maybe that’s why I’ve got no friends. Unconsciously, I rub my cheeks, feeling my cheekbones beneath my skin. I’ve always felt they were too pronounced, but Rani says they’re pretty. I think she’s consoling me.

“First Aid,” Rani says as she studies our schedule. “We’ve got to prepare for Geography class after that. Six chapters to read, remember?”

Our proper education lessons for the first six years officially

ended a week ago. They consisted of general subjects like English, Maths, Science and Social Studies. A week from now, we’ll be allowed to choose a specialisation in a subject. Kinda like how people on the outside choose their majors for university or their diplomas. So, when we’re not bogged down by work for ARK, we’re studying like mad for our examinations. Tell me about stress management. Rani and I have chosen to specialise in Geography. Not that either of us particularly fancy the subject. Rani’s the social worker-childcare type while me, well, I haven’t really thought about it. There aren’t that many options available for us anyway.

“I’m horrible with first aid,” I grunt. “Why do we even have to learn something like that? Down there, if we get injured, we’re dead. We’ve studied what those wildbeasts can do.”

“You’d better hope your partner is good at it then,” Rani says. “It could come in useful when we’re, like, out there.”

“When we finally leave this stupid organisation, you mean.” I return her smile with a sardonic one. “That’s the goal, isn’t it? Get ready, get good and get out. Of course, the first step would be to get a good partner.”

“Oh, but have you heard? There’s a guy who just got out from probation. He’s joining the Tracker selection this time round.”

“Probation? What for?”

“Hurting a Cross. He lost control during a rescue mission and put the Cross in hospital for a month”—she shudders—“ARK had a hard time covering it up. He was put on probation for a year.”

“Why would he hurt a Cross?”

“Protecting one of the children.”

“A Pentagon,” I say venomously. “He’s crazy.”

“They’re different,” she concedes. “But different doesn’t mean wrong.”

In spite of myself, I feel a flash of frustration.

“Might I remind you that this *difference* is what landed me in this predicament. And also, what made me an orphan and a slave to ARK.”

The moment the words leave my mouth, I feel a stab of guilt. I’m snapping at her impulsively over something she isn’t responsible for.

“Sorry.”

“Nah. I’ve known you long enough to not be offended by something like that,” she replies, raising an eyebrow. “You’re capable of much worse.”

“Hey!”

“Just kidding.”

I’m not sure why I’m feeling restless. I don’t usually push the conversation that far when it comes to the Pentagons. I’d rather not talk about them. Maybe all that discussion about our vocations and partners is getting to me more than I realise. It goes without saying that I’d rather be in a vocation that doesn’t involve dealing directly with the Pentagons.

“I sure hope I’m not a Tracker.” I grimace. “Why can’t they just let us choose our own vocations? I’d rather be a Geographer or an Interceptor.”

Geographers get to map out the Forbidden Paths for Trackers. Interceptors are in the communications hub and receive calls for help from the public regarding incidents involving Pentagons. Trackers are then deployed to retrieve the Pentagon. ARK uses the Forbidden Paths for two reasons. Firstly, the government punishes

anyone involved with Pentagons ever since the Sierg War ended fifty-three years ago. Secondly, the Forbidden Paths enable ARK to access the incident sites quicker than government forces can. It is a bizarre game of cat and mouse, played with our lives on the line.

“As if.” Rani climbs onto her bed above mine. “With skills like yours, you’re almost guaranteed to be a Tracker. Almost everyone in Ben’s close-combat classes are.”

“Should’ve thought about that earlier on and faked my way through his classes. I guess it’s a little too late for regrets.”

“Yeah, only about six years too late.”

I can hear the smile in her voice.

“Anyway, there’re plenty of other people I can be paired with. I’m not going to worry too much about that idiot.”

“Plenty of other people? Like Jasper?” Rani pops her head over the edge of the bed.

“Well, yeah, what about him?”

“He’s hot.”

“Uh huh.”

“You’re smiling.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.”

We stare at each other, then simultaneously burst into fits of giggles.

“I’ll think about boys after I’m done with this organisation,” I say. “There are probably plenty of Jaspers out there.”

“Or the world could be full of pigs,” she laughs. “How would you know? We haven’t been out there for years.”

“All the more reason I wanna be done with this as soon as

possible. Get ready, get good and get out. I hate this place. The way everyone goes on and on about Pentagons...”

“This is why—” she begins, rolling her eyes.

“People hate me?”

“They don’t hate you, Zan,” she says. “They respect you.”

“I don’t think that’s respect.” I pull a face. “And it only lasts until someone brings up the Pentagons and...”

My voice trails off. I don’t want to get into another argument with her. It’s not fair for me to direct my anger about Pentagons at her. Rani’s my best friend. My only friend, actually. And that is the only topic where our opinions differ. She thinks we should give the Pentagons a chance. I think we shouldn’t. In here, I’m part of the minority. But out there, in the world outside, I’m pretty sure I’m in the majority.

“Anyway,” I hastily change the subject. “The organisation will take care of our pairings. I don’t think we have to worry about that.”

“That score-card thing Ben carries around? That’s exactly what I’m worried about. This is gonna be the person who’ll have your back for the next five years, you know?”

She’s right. But Trackers can’t choose their partners. Luckily we’ll be given a month of trial sessions with our partners before we embark on our first missions. So, I guess that’s when we’ll know for sure if we’re the right fit. At least there’s still a chance that I’ll be paired with Rani. If there’s anyone I can count on to save me from a raging wildbeast, it’s her.

Since there’s still time before first aid lessons begin, I decide to lean back and rest. I unbuckle the various straps around my waist, arms and boots. Each strap is attached to a sheath with a

blade nestled snugly inside. I draw the biggest blade, a parang. It’s the one I usually hang from my waist. The black blade glints under the lonely light bulb hanging from the ceiling. Malaium. Mined straight from the Forbidden Paths. It’s the only substance that can hurt the wildbeasts. And even then, we have difficulty slaying these creatures. Ordinary bullets are about as useful as putting on mittens and punching an elephant in the stomach.

“If someone made Malaium bullets, that’ll be great,” I muse out loud, making a finger gun and pointing it at an imaginary target. “Bang! Problem solved.”

Rani’s head appears once again, dangling over the edge of the top bunk, her black hair falling like a waterfall over her face.

“And expensive,” she says, sticking out her tongue. “Not to mention ARK probably doesn’t have the machinery or technology for it.”

“Stop that,” I complain, poking her cheek. “You look like a pontianak.”

“Bleh.” Her head retracts, disappearing from sight.

I guess she’s right. We’re stuck with blades. Honestly, I think a sharp diamond blade would do the trick too. We probably don’t use diamond because it’s even more expensive.

Our blades are infused with parts taken from dead wildbeasts, causing the rich jet-black of the Malaium to be flecked with oddly coloured specks. They seem to work better that way. I get up to sharpen the parang and oil it down. It’s sixty centimetres long and pretty light, the perfect weapon for someone of my size. I’ve got four other knives—two daggers and two bowie knives—each as darkly sinister as the parang. They have yet to taste the blood of a wildbeast, but they soon will.

TWO

A LOUD SCREECHING fills the air. The grand finale of Ben's close-combat classes. We're sitting in a vague semicircle on the floor of a large oval room. The floor is padded. The ceiling is padded. So is the door. Everything is padded. Welcome to ARK's sanatorium. It's the safest training room we have in this facility. And for that reason, it's used for wildbeast-related training activities like the one we are having right now. Usually, we train with holograms and simulations. But this time, to cap off our six years of rigorous practice, we're about to deal with the real thing.

A wooden crate in the centre of the room is shaking and creaking violently at intervals. Beady yellow eyes glare out from the wooden slits. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't nervous about this.

"All right," Ben yells, slapping the crate in a bid to quiet the wildbeast but instead drawing an enraged scream. "Can anyone tell me what's in the crate?"

Aside from the rumours about this particular session, it is easy to guess what horrors lie in wait inside the crate. The ear-piercing screeches give it away to the other trainees.

"Hylozaghén," says the sandy-haired boy I fought earlier, raising his voice to be heard above the din. "Pointed snout, vicious tusks and razor-sharp claws."

"Excellent, Jasper." Ben beams.

A couple of boys in the crowd whistle. Jasper's popular, and not just amongst the girls. A self-effacing smile creases his lips.

"It's basically an overgrown pig," Rani whispers in my ear when it becomes apparent from the look on my face that the wildbeast's name doesn't exist in my vocabulary. "Ms Xuan covered it at the start of last year."

"How am I supposed to remember what she taught us a year ago?" I grumble. "Wildbeast theory was never my best subject anyway."

"All right, all right," Ben yells once more, clapping his hands for extra impact. "Keep it down now."

The wildbeast screeches even louder in response.

"You'll attack it in teams of two," Ben continues, glaring at the crate. "I'll give you the cue for the next pair to step in. And here is the pairing list and order of attack."

He passes around a list that the trainees clamour around. Excited chatter soon overshadows the deafening screeching coming from the crate.

"When it's my turn," I mutter darkly to Rani, "the first thing I'm gonna do is cut that thing's vocal cords."

Before she can reply, someone taps me on the shoulder. I spin around. Large, piercing eyes stare back at me.

"Zan." A dazzling smile greets my gaze. "We're paired up."

"Jasper." I nod, mildly surprised. "Looks like we're going—"

"Last." He grins, shaking my hand. "Not that I'm bothered by it."

He's only a little taller than I am, toned and muscular. A red snake is on the back of his hand.

"Not bothered?" I echo. "I thought you'd be raring to go."

"I'd rather go last and partner with someone who can destroy me in hand-to-hand combat."

"Uh...thanks," I say quickly. I don't handle flattery well,

obviously. Not knowing what else to say, I throw in, “You’re strong too.” Oh, *wow*, why am I so awkward?

He laughs.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Rani give me a surreptitious wink. I try my best to pretend that I didn’t see it. Ben pulls out a whistle from his pocket and blows. The first pair steps forward, two boys whom I know only vaguely. They draw their blades and stand on opposite sides of the sanatorium, facing the crate. Even from here, I can see them trembling. The rest of us climb up to sit on a set of terraced steps and watch with undisguised interest. This is the first time we’re seeing a wildbeast in real life after all. Ben unlocks the cage and kicks the door slightly ajar.

There’s a second of silence. Then, a screaming ball of rage erupts from within the dingy depths of the crate, blowing the door right off its creaky wooden hinges. Hylozaghien. I don’t know why they didn’t just name the thing Fat, Deformed and Grotesque Pig or something. Because that’s what it is. Bulbous, submarine-like body, six legs ending in clawed feet and a pointed snout flanked by four curved tusks. It’s about three metres long and taller than Rani. I can’t figure out how it’s making that infernal noise until I see a gaping maw on its underbelly filled with rows of squarish teeth.

“Move!” Ben roars, slapping one of the boys on the shoulder as the pig barrels past. “Come on! Don’t just stand there!”

Anyone who can look that thing in the eye for the first time and think “let’s kill it” is probably insane. The boys scatter.

“When are you up?” I whisper to Rani.

“Second to last,” she replies, her eyes glued to the mayhem below. “Oh my gosh, he almost got gored!”

The whistle sounds and the next pair steps in. If I was worried

that someone might kill the wildbeast before it was my turn, I needn’t have. Pair after pair get flung around the arena like rag dolls. Ben is the only thing keeping them from being gored or clawed to ribbons. He pushes the trainees out of the way, blocks the wildbeast’s attacks and attracts its attention whenever things get hairy. Sometimes, the trainees try to attack it, but it simply rips into their dismal attempts, throwing them into complete disarray. It works its way through seven pairs of trainees faster than I can chew through two pieces of youtiao at breakfast. A mix of apprehension and excitement ripples down my spine. I breathe in deeply, then exhale slowly.

“Wish me luck,” Rani says as the whistle sounds once more.

She and her partner, Afiq, a tall, muscular boy, step into the arena. Immediately, the pig rushes at them. Rani dives to the left, her partner to the right. The pig screeches, turning on Afiq, who chops at it with his sword. The blade glances harmlessly off the creature’s tusk.

“Hey!” Rani yells. “Over here!”

The wildbeast twists around, too quickly for something of that size, and charges at her. She barely dodges it. Ben moves in, clapping loudly to draw its attention, giving Rani and her partner time to recover. *Skrrrk*. I glance down briefly. My hands are gripping the edge of the terrace step, my fingernails scratching the dull surface. I can feel the first beads of sweat gathering in my palms.

The wildbeast runs at Ben, who catches it firmly by the tusks and turns its head sharply to one side. The padding on the wall is shredded as the creature struggles. That’s insane. He’s more of a monster than the wildbeast. Rani circles around as Ben releases the creature. She slashes at it with her knife, drawing a spurt of green

blood. It screeches indignantly, swiping at her with its clawed feet. She tries to dive, but it catches her and sends her flying into the air, landing in a crumpled heap by the wall. Enraged, it charges at her.

“Rani!” I shout.

She looks up to find a couple hundred kilograms of bacon bearing down on her. Ben claps loudly, but the wildbeast ignores him. Shit. She’s not gonna have time to dodge it. She can’t. Not with the wall at her back. Afiq flings his knife at it. And misses.

Quite suddenly, I find myself in the air. That’s strange. I didn’t hear Ben’s whistle. I guess I must’ve leapt from the top of the terraced steps. I draw my parang into the air and bring it down hard on the wildbeast’s head. I land on its back, the blade opening up a gash right in the middle of its head. It screeches and bucks wildly, crashing headlong into the padded wall and throwing me off.

“Zan!”

“Stay down,” I call to Rani. “It’s not done yet.”

A cold, quiet calm settles over the trepidation bubbling in my gut. There’s no way I’m letting this thing get to her. I duck as claws swing over my head. Ben and Afiq carry Rani out of the arena. Jasper’s running down the terraced steps. I roll under a claw, slashing upwards with my parang. The claw falls to the ground and the creature careens wildly, collapsing onto its knees. Big mistake. I’m on my back under it, its maw right above my face. I wedge one of my bowie knives between its jaws and stab it several times in the belly with the other. There’s no space to swing my parang.

“Watch out!”

I’m not sure who shouted that. Maybe Jasper. The wildbeast claws at me once more. I kick out against the side of its jaw, sliding out from under it. The tusks come around. I block them with the

spine of my parang, feeling the shock travel all the way down my arm. Even so, the force knocks me back several paces and I feel my unwilling feet slide across the padded floor. I can’t imagine how Ben managed to stop it. With my free hand, I draw one of my daggers, burying it in the wildbeast’s eye.

It goes into a frenzy, thrashing about madly. I still can’t figure out where its vocal cords are. Ignoring its screeching, I lay into it, striking repeatedly with my blade. By the time I hear Ben’s whistle, the wildbeast is dead. I’m covered in green blood and my heart is pounding like a five-year-old at a whack-a-mole game. I’m breathing hard, but strangely calm considering the fact that I just killed a monstrous pig.

“That was amazing!” Ben yells. “You—”

“Rani!” I huff, brushing past him. “Where’s Rani?”

“The infirmary.” Jasper raises both hands in a pacifying gesture. “Shiria took her there.”

At the mention of the name, I vaguely recall a small girl, her hair always hanging in braids. She’s a Cross, if I’m not wrong.

I can feel several eyes on my back. When I turn, I see looks of awe, shock, envy and...fear in my classmates. I back up, adrenaline dissolving into uneasiness. A sudden urge to vanish from this place manifests in my gut.

“I’m gonna go check on her,” I mutter.

“Zan, wait!”

I march over to the wildbeast and rip my weapons free. Sheathing them, I run from the sanatorium. Jasper follows me.

“Zan!”

I whirl around aggressively. “What do you want?”

“Uh...you’re going the wrong way.”

I blink. He's right. I was running down the wrong hallway. I don't know why I feel so flustered. My heart's still thumping hard, though I don't think it's completely due to the wildbeast. I don't get it. I've been the centre of attention before, but it's never felt so...so...lonely.

"Thanks," I mumble, setting off in the opposite direction. I can hear his footsteps behind me.

The infirmary is one of the largest rooms in ARK's compound. And it's filled with beds. The medicinal stench of disinfectant assaults my nostrils as two glass doors slide open. As usual, there are too many patients to count. I've been here several times throughout my training, and it never fails to irk me. I hate it. Many of the beds are occupied by patients swathed in bandages, each in varying degrees of pain. Some are missing limbs while others lie immobile, their penetrating gazes tracking us across the room.

"Are they..." Jasper begins.

"Trackers." I clench my teeth. "All for the sake of those Pentagons."

I spit the last word out as though it's part of that little bit of grit stuck in between your teeth after a meal. He doesn't notice. He's too busy gaping at a man whose stomach has been sliced open. The man moans softly as nurses pile gauze pads around the wound. I can still see the offending object, a long bony spine of some sort sticking out of his abdomen like a toothpick in a piece of bak kwa at a Chinese New Year goodies sampling station. Then, he's wheeled away and we see no more of his gruesome injury.

Rani's sitting up when we arrive. She smiles when she sees me, then winks when she spots Jasper. I ignore the wink, feeling relief rush through me.

"How are you?" I ask worriedly.

"Mild concussion," replies a small, quiet girl sitting by the bed.

Shiria. Her light brown skin matches the chocolate of her large eyes. She seldom speaks, but I know from experience that she's deadly. I've sparred with her on occasion and we've sent each other here before. She's staring at me like she wants nothing more than to put me in here permanently, her lips set in a thin line.

"Zan, I'm fine," Rani laughs. "The walls are padded for a reason, right?"

No one laughs. We're all thinking the same thing. If that wildbeast could take down so many of us, what chance do we stand out there in the Forbidden Paths? We'd be lucky to be flung into a wall of solid rock. There are rumours that the walls themselves in some Forbidden Paths will attempt to eat you alive.

"She killed it," Jasper announces.

I wince, waiting for that dreaded expression of fear. Not Rani, I think to myself. Please.

"Am I supposed to be surprised?" Rani grins, slapping me on the back. "If anyone could do it, it would be you! Oh, and maybe Jasper."

"Why, thank you," Jasper says wryly and they both laugh. Shiria's expression is unreadable.

We spend the day in this manner, Rani and Jasper trying their best to lighten the mood while Shiria and I remain silent. The threat these wildbeasts pose and the need for a competent partner have never been so apparent. Previously I didn't care who my partner would be. I just wanted to serve my time and be released from ARK. But now, I understand fully that without a good partner, I might not even make it through the next five years.

THREE

“LINE UP! COME on, cut the chatter and listen!” Ben shouts. “When I call your name, I’ll give you a number. All you have to do is proceed to the booth with that number. The person at your booth will be your partner for the next five years. You have an hour to talk things out and introduce yourselves if need be.”

It’s the day we’re to be invested as Trackers. Rani was right. Most of the trainees in Ben’s close-combat class have been selected as Trackers. The ceremony was, quite honestly, boring. Some speech by some dude in a suit, applause, more talking, more applause and so on. My stomach feels queasy, strangely reminiscent of the time I consumed one too many onde-onde. All that’s on my mind is who my partner will be.

There are seventeen of us standing in line in a long hallway. The booths are farther down and are usually used for extreme close-combat training. They’re only slightly bigger than your average lavatory and completely bare. Right now, I’m just hoping that I’m paired with Rani. I mean, surely being friends for years counts for something, right? Like better coordination and stuff.

“Aren’t you excited?” Rani whispers in my ear. “Who do you think you’ll get? Jasper?”

She’s so loud I swear he heard.

“Oh, come on,” I smile, determined not to look in his direction. “I’ll be fine with anyone.”

“Rani, booth eighteen! Zan, booth twenty!” Ben announces.

“Ah...”

“Looks like we aren’t paired.” I can’t keep the disappointment from my voice as we walk down the hall.

“You like me that much?”

“Stuff it.”

She laughs. “S’okay,” she pats me on the back, “we’re still rooming together, right?”

“Yeah.”

We walk the rest of the way in silence. Our booths are the farthest from Ben, down the hall and around a corner. One of the lights is broken, its intermittent flickering making the corridor look like a cliché horror-movie set. Rani turns the corner a step ahead of me and stops short so suddenly that my face high-fives her shoulder blades.

“Ouch! Why’d you—”

Standing at the end of the corridor is a figure dressed fully in black, including gloves and a bulletproof vest. Slung across the figure’s back is a long object almost twice the figure’s height, wrapped in strips of cloth. I feel a threatening aura. Something’s not right. Who the hell is that? An intruder? Impossible. The light above me flickers. Dark. Bright. Dark. Bright. The figure begins to turn. A chill. I’ve felt this before. No. It must not happen again.

Without thinking, I move. My parang sings through the air towards the figure’s neck, a move which should’ve ended the fight. Except the figure is no longer there. My blade stops short. A flash of pain. I’m hurled into the wooden door of one of the booths as a boot slams into my stomach. Gasping for breath, I grab the handle of the door and pull it open, ducking as a knife buries itself into the wood. My parang comes around. I wince as Malaikum bites



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TEO XUE SHEN is the author of *18 Walls*, which was longlisted for the Epigram Books Fiction Prize in 2017. He wrote *18 Walls* and *Children of the Ark* on his phone during his time in National Service, the latter during training in Australia. He is currently an undergraduate at the National University of Singapore in environmental studies. He is an avid scoutmaster and fisherman.



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A circular arrangement of hands in various shades of yellow and orange, set against a blue background. Each hand has a different tattoo: a snake, a star, a dagger, a pentagon, and a cross. The hands are positioned as if they are about to clasp together.

“Lively characters and a gripping plot.”

—Lu Huiyi, author of *Beng Beng Revolution*

Eighteen-year-old Zan loves her coffee, her parang and her best (and only) friend Rani. She is focused on serving out her time with an underground organisation called ARK when she meets Ray, a mysterious fighter everyone fears. Paired to battle grotesque creatures in the Forbidden Paths, Zan discovers she and Ray have more in common than she thinks.

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ISBN 978-981-49-0144-4



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