

BEASTOSIS

獸靈之詩

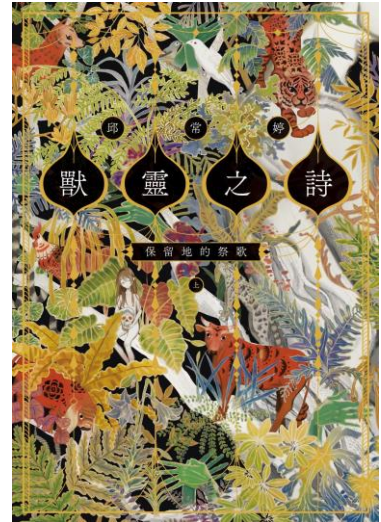
On an occupied island, the only hope for freedom is born in a primitive village on a tribal reservation – a mythical entity that grants superpowers, known as Beastosis.

After their parents disappear from their village, Taibang and his little brother Luan must depend on each other for survival. Because of the shortage of resources on the tribal reservation, Taibang must compete with his fellow villagers to snatch up the provisions that are air-dropped in by an occupying army.

One day, the brothers are unexpectedly selected to be assistants to the village emissary, which means they must follow the emissary on a journey beyond the mountains that gird the reservation, to the remains of an ancient village where the army has set up camp. Along the way they encounter many strange sights, including a red-faced totem that appears to conceal a momentous secret. Yet, after arriving at the ruins, the brothers soon realize they have only taken the first small steps towards understanding how vast, and dangerous, their world truly is.

Elsewhere, in a cold northern city, a graduate student named Lily faces an uncertain future. When her close friend falls victim to serial killer, Lily decides to track down the murderer herself, regardless of the dangers it might entail. At the same time, a mysterious force is awakened within her, releasing repressed memories from a decade before. As Lily approaches her inevitable confrontation with evil, how will she face up to the conflicts of the past?

Beastosis is the latest fantasy novel from literary and children's book author Chiou Charng-Ting. Epic in scale, the novel is set in a richly imagined and seamlessly crafted world where a resistance movement struggles against authoritarian rule, and steadfast friendships are forged among those suffering from oppression. Action, romance, and suspense are all given their due as multiple



Category: Fantasy

Publisher: Apex

Date: 4/2023

Rights contact:

booksfromtaiwan@taicca.tw

Pages: 544

Length: 360,600 characters

(approx. 234,300 words in English)

narratives unfold across a range of settings, delivering a reading experience unlike anything readers have seen before.

Chiou Charng-Ting 邱常婷

Chiou Charng-Ting earned her literary MFA from Dong Hwa University, and she is currently pursuing a PhD in children's literature at National Taitung University. Her work, which spans genre fiction, fantasy, children's literature, and upmarket literature, has won the King Car Fantasy Prize, the Unitas New Author Award, and the Openbook Award.

BEASTOSIS

By Chiou Charng-Ting

Translated by Joel Martinsen

Taibang always knew his younger brother was different from other people.

First off was the smell: Taibang's nose was excellent, as keen as a black bear's, and his brother smelled familiar and warm – if he was willing to admit it, like honey made from passionfruit and longan nectar. Crying, he smelled like a soggy dog; angry, like the bitter, scorched scent of the earth prior to a thunderstorm, which made Taibang sneeze. When his brother went running late at night, his armpits smelled strongly of gray-blue spicebush and sliced through the forest like twin glowing beams, painting a scent track that Taibang could trace all the way to a cave in the northern forest to find his brother curled up and brooding.

In addition, Taibang thought his brother was smart. One of the few children who understood the writing of outsiders, the boy was sensitive to details and knew how to draw. In quiet moments, the scent of longan-passionfruit honey was more apparent, and when he concentrated on his charcoal sketches, his bodily aroma would burst forth with a sweetness that made Taibang's head spin and had him constantly wrinkling his nose. His brother was a boy, and Taibang knew what boys ought to be like: pungent, unsophisticated scents of metal and bonfires, soot and cinders, and sometimes the stench of fresh blood and animal corpses.

His brother smelled nothing like a boy.

Sometimes Taibang would wonder whether, even before realizing it, his brother already understood the mystery of his body. Always gently observing his surroundings, favoring beautiful, brightly colored clothing, hating filth, letting his hair grow long and not permitting Taibang to cut it – and later not even letting Taibang call him by his name.

And so for a long while, Taibang called him “Didi” – younger brother.

He didn't seem to like that name, either.

Taibang didn't make an issue of it; people here lived how they pleased, after all, and no one cared what his brother would ultimately grow up to be. By the first time he was bullied in the tribe, as his not-too-clever elder brother, Taibang was well-muscled enough to drive off the bad kids with a display of fists. Then he dragged his scuffed-up younger brother to the brook, stripped off his filthy clothes, and gave him a thorough washing.

Covered in wounds, the first thing he said was, “I want to change my name.”

“What do you want to change your name to?”

“Luan.”

Luan meant the mountain fog, but it was also a girl's name. Taibang sighed. “You can be called whatever you'd like.”

Taibang had no family apart from Luan so he rarely refused his brother's requests; the emissary would not bother them so long as they did not stray too far from the village, and as far as the army was concerned, their names were meaningless, of value only to themselves.

Their tribe was small, ten or twenty families, but was still required by the army to dispatch an emissary. For as long as Taibang could remember, he had always known the tribe was their home, and that far off to the north was a border that was not to be crossed or else the army stationed there would shoot you dead. Adults imagined that children didn't know the reason and were unclear about the nature of the place, and perhaps that was true for most of them – Taibang excepted. Scarcity had prompted their father to sneak across the border in search of supplies, and although Luan had been too young at the time, Taibang had gotten to taste a flat food that was oily and crisp, as well as a dark-colored, living sweetwater that hissed as it breathed, although his father and mother instructed him to wait for the bubbles to disappear and only drink the sweetwater when it had stopped breathing so it wouldn't prick his tongue.

One day their parents disappeared without a trace, apparently having decided to leave the reservation forever only to be discovered by the army, which carried off their bodies. "They brought it on themselves," Abak remarked at the time without explaining further, but from then on Taibang knew he had only Luan left and needed to take care of him.

Someone who died a violent death away from home would become an evil spirit. Such was their belief – as evil spirits, dead souls would harm the living, while only a death at home would allow someone to become an ancestral spirit, a good soul. The mutual opposition and obstruction of good and bad souls constituted the tribe's daily life: no prey when hunting in the mountains might be mischief from bad souls; a sudden recovery from an illness might be the protection of ancestral spirits.

Tribespeople feared and detested evil spirits, but more than that they felt boundary crossers were traitors who brought the cloud of army suspicion onto the entire tribe.

Taibang hated the army with his whole heart, a hatred that smoldered like a charcoal ember regardless of the tribe elders' claim that the army's actions were for the good of everyone on the reservation, since their bodies were too fragile to withstand the fearsome illnesses and pollution of the world outside. He couldn't quell his hatred and had often wondered about the reason for his parents' death – had they died because they had failed? Or because they had succeeded? After all, there was no punishment for successfully fleeing the reservation – you just couldn't turn back. If you returned after leaving, you brought with you the outside germs that would lead to death, and so to protect the people on the reservation, the army would shoot dead those who turned back. Taibang couldn't say whether he hoped his parents had succeeded or failed, because if they had indeed crossed the border, there was no question that he and Luan would have been their one reason for returning.

He also wanted to know why they had wanted to cross over, leaving the two of them to fend for themselves. "Because they didn't care about you and your brother," a tribe elder had gloated as Taibang was in tears after hearing the news.

Because they hated tribal life. That was what Taibang ultimately concluded. But was life really so good beyond the border? He had heard that due to illness and pollution, most people on the outside had died, and the remainder lived in cities under an enormous glass bubble.

These were just rumors that Taibang found unbelievable, and his impulse upon hearing them was to laugh, but also to cry. The very first time he heard one of these secrets, he had to cover his mouth to contain his intense emotions, lest he be discovered by the other emissaries. It was a habit he had long cultivated: eavesdropping on the meetings the emissaries held in the guardhouse. He would hide out of sight in the silvergrass, where he would press an ear – no less sensitive than his nose – to the ground and hear the voices inside a meter away.

Known as Abak, the emissary who served as the reservation's link to the army was typically among the tribe's most promising adults. The root meaning of the word was soul, but the word had been modified to designate tribe emissaries. Sadly, becoming Abak meant a person abandoned their original name. From then on they used the name Abak and could not reclaim their former name even if they left the position – a former Abak became nameless, and tribespeople would conduct an expulsion ceremony to drive them out of the village.

After becoming Abak, the emissary moved into a small hut at the village entrance known as the guardhouse. The implication was clear: in the future he or she would be a bridge between the village and the army and were no longer entirely trustworthy. Nevertheless, people of the tribe still secretly trusted Abak, even if that trust was not openly expressed. In Taibang and Luan's tribe, a handover had just taken place, and the new Abak was a short young man just twenty years of age, with a dark reddish face that, in the past, had always borne a warm smile.

Abak occasionally caught Taibang while eavesdropping, but fortunately the new Abak was an understanding person who always let him go with a warning to not get caught next time. In this way Taibang learned more than other children his age.

Life in the village was hard. Taibang's daily task was to look for edible berries or rootstalks in the forest and, if he happened across efficacious medicinal herbs, bring them back home or resell them to the old witch Ivivigi. He didn't much like her. Every time she saw him, she would mutter, "Oh my, that's the boy who will soon become a clouded leopard." Taibang knew the legend but did not know why the witch always carried on so – and he had lots of work to do.

Every few days, when urban areas would make deliveries of supplies to the reservation, Taibang would go to a drop point near the village to scavenge. Luan had often expressed a desire to go too, but scavenging inevitably meant conflicts with other clanspeople – or even other tribes – and while Taibang, a nimble boy of fourteen, was able to make a quick escape if trouble transpired, the weaker Luan would have been easily caught.

"Wait until you're as tall as I am and we'll see," Taibang would promise, and then reach out and rub Luan's head.

The supplies generally consisted of things that could also be found on the reservation: fruit like mangos, passionfruit, papaya, and bananas plus honeycomb and beetle larvae, and occasionally, if they were lucky, meat like boar or sambar. Taibang never saw the greasy potato wafers and black sweetwater his parents had given him among the supplies.

Hunting and gathering those foods on the reservation wasn't easy work. Receiving a full basket of food that would otherwise require a month of effort was a good thing in the mind of most clanspeople, even if Ivivigi muttered that scavengers would be cursed, because meat that was obtained without effort was an insult to the clan's skilled hunters.

Other adults eager to scavenge simply ignored the curse, for what you obtained depended entirely on your own skills, so even a young orphan like Taibang was qualified. At first, he often came up empty handed due to lack of experience – he was immediately pushed to the ground by an adult, or had food snatched from his grasp, but as time slowly passed, he learned how to nimbly dart his slender frame in and out of gaps and, as he grew a little older and bigger, to hold his own against the adults.

He had never given up competing for supplies, because the baskets held not just food but lots of daily use items as well – fabric, cotton, matches, tools, tableware – all of which were essential if he was going to let Luan live well.

What would Luan do if he didn't have me? was a question he pondered frequently. An inexplicable sadness hit his chest with a palpable sting, and when he began to fall ill later on, he would remember that sadness and unease as its point of origin, causing fevers, tears, dry throat, and weak limbs, as if somehow, without him noticing, his organs had exited his body and were roving at large. What good was all his worry and attachment? For whatever reason, Taibang knew he was helpless to do anything but pretend all was well, to pull himself together to continue their journey.

The days passed and the two brothers slowly grew up. This is the story of the boy who would soon become a clouded leopard and his younger brother.

*

It was a longer, hotter summer than in years past, so Taibang took some provisions and set out early from the Krolom tribe while the sky was still gray and the air cool and clear, to cross the forests toward the drop point. He had learned of the delivery time a few days ago, but in the hope of a better yield, he did not share the secret with anyone else; the shame he felt only increased his determination.

He saw an enormous black shadow sweep over the land, and he looked up to watch a slim, long-bodied bird fly overhead and drop a large number of supply baskets from its belly. He waited until after the baskets had landed before venturing forward to examine them and search for the special items Luan needed, which he couldn't let anyone else see.

Before long, people young and old were approaching, having seen the supply drop from afar. Exchanging glances like cats encountering each other before furtively averting their eyes and heading off in a different direction, they strove to preserve the appearance of peaceful coexistence as they searched for supplies. Taibang knew the reason all too well: after a few deliveries had sparked outbursts of violence, the army began monitoring every supply drop from the trees.

However, complete absence of conflict was impossible. To keep clear, Taibang decided to quit while he was ahead – he was nearly finished scavenging by this point anyway – so he carefully wrapped his collected items in muntjac skin, tied it into a bundle, and set off toward home in the shadow of the mountainside.

All of a sudden, his ears picked up a faint weeping plus a few words of panicked conversation, and he looked back into the thickening crowd to pinpoint the source. The tones were familiar – a clansperson – and after a moment's thought he identified the crier as a girl named Magake, who had an elder brother named Dano. Magake and Dano were among the few clanspeople in the tribe who spoke to Taibang, if only because their father had also left the tribe and, whether or not he had also crossed the border, had never come back.

A new batch of supplies hit the ground and the crowd shifted at once, while the tiny figures of Magake and Dano stood helplessly against the mountain wall. Timid as they were, once spooked they were too scared to rejoin the tussle, and instead waited to pick from what was left over. As the crowd thinned, Dano anxiously inspected each of the remaining supply baskets to see if they still contained anything. His sister stood sobbing to one side, her face scuffed, perhaps from a blow received during their earlier scavenging.

“Don't cry, Magake,” Dano said, attempting to soothe her as he examined the baskets. “I'll have a look at your cuts in a little while. Don't cry.... The army's going to notice you like this.”

Magake sniffled but couldn't hold her tears back. “Dano, I miss Dad. Why won't Dad come back?”

“He's not here anymore. He might be dead. Shhh.... Magake, you've got to...”

“I miss Dad.” She seemed on the verge of losing control, and her choked-back sobs were increasingly conspicuous. “If only he were still here. I don't want to look at Mom's tear-stained face every day. What's near the border? What makes Dad not want to come back?”

“Magake.” Dano's voice began to tremble, and even from his distant vantage point Taibang could see rustling in the trees, followed by the faint, low rumble of something approaching. But Magake kept talking.

“Gege, can't we and Mom just leave? We'll go look for Dad together. Why won't Dad come back?”

“Magake! Stop talking....”

“Dad came back to see me once.” There was a dreamlike quality to her sobbing voice. “One night when you and Mom were asleep, I was lying on the ground when I suddenly woke up. The moon outside shone on my face, and I saw Dad's upper body poking into the house. He bent down and extended a long arm toward me and placed something soft and slippery into my mouth.” She licked her lips as if remembering. “I couldn't identify the flavor. It was, I don't know, a little sweet but not really. What mostly grabbed hold of my tongue was a little bitter. I spit, but it had already melted. It was the color of dried-up coconut leaves. I licked it up and it turned sweet again in my mouth.... Such a marvelous food! And one I had never tasted here before.”

Dano seemed at a loss for words. “You mean.... Dad came back to see us? For real, Magake?”

The rumble was growing more intense, and the tree leaves and branches began swaying back and forth as the thing drew nearer. Anxiety burned in Taibang, but Magake and Dano remained frozen, staring at each other.

Quick as a flash, Taibang sliced his shouldered bundle with a small blade, opening a wide gash in the pelt and the sack underneath and blanketing the ground with the food and other items he had just gathered: fruit, sweet potato, and chunks of meat, plus pastel cloth and a box of strange objects in a rainbow of colors – what they were only Taibang knew. These things unrelated to daily life that were occasionally found among the distributed supplies and usually passed over by the others were just what Luan desired.

The other scavengers in the area surged over. After all, Taibang had arrived first and had his choice of the best stuff. Amid the chaos, someone joked, “You’re really careless. I’ll help you pick up,” but everything the man picked up landed in his own sack. Someone else teased, “All that colorful fabric – you thinking of getting married?”

In the confusion, Magake and Dano were swallowed up into the crowd, but that wasn’t the end of the commotion in the trees, which switched instead to watching for violent behavior among the scavengers. The siblings seemed to suddenly regain their senses and squatted down to scramble for things on the ground, passing food and repeated thanks to Taibang as they did so. Feigning ignorance, he made no reply but merely picked up a some food and a few things Luan particularly enjoyed and then followed the dispersing crowd back home.

Where he and Luan lived was called Charcoal House.

Small and run-down, and blackened by smoke besides, the house had grown ever more strange without adult assistance for upkeep and cleaning: holes in the roof patched at random with ill-fitting planks and broken windows covered haphazardly with animal hides or plastic boards, all to ensure it continued to shield the two of them from the elements. No matter how ugly it was, Charcoal House was their home.

Taibang opened the plank door and slipped quickly inside, where the blend of Luan’s passionfruit scent and the smell of charcoal and hides enveloped and calmed him. He greeted his younger brother and began laying out the items from his bag one at a time onto the table to prepare for sorting.

The first time he had brought back a thin, hard box of small sticks in assorted colors, once Luan figured out how to use them, he had been overjoyed. By reading the foreign text on the box, although he had no way of knowing the pronunciation, he could remember the shape and order of the letters and could understand what they meant whenever he saw identical letters thereafter, just like the colored sticks themselves. Luan used them carefully – Taibang watched as he drew lots of beautiful pictures until the sticks slowly disappeared and he went back to sketching with charcoal.

Taibang laid the things out on the table and waited for Luan to discover them. He started preparing dinner, taking out the unhusked millet and preserved muntjac and occasionally glancing over to see what Luan was up to. At the table, Luan was focused on daubing a piece of charcoal and had not noticed the gift waiting for him. Taibang laughed. “What are you drawing?”

“A clouded leopard.”

“Really? It looks more like a cat.”

Wrinkling up his nose, Luan raised his head and was about to lash back when he noticed the brand-new colored sticks in front of him, and without a glance at anything else, snapped open the box and began coloring the leopard.

After dinner, Luan silently draped an arm across Taibang’s neck.

“Luan, next time you should draw me a hundred-pace viper,” Taibang said with a grin.

Luan shook his head. His cheeks were flushed, and knowing his younger brother, Taibang understood he wanted to express his gratitude but was embarrassed. And so he picked him up and carried him to bed.