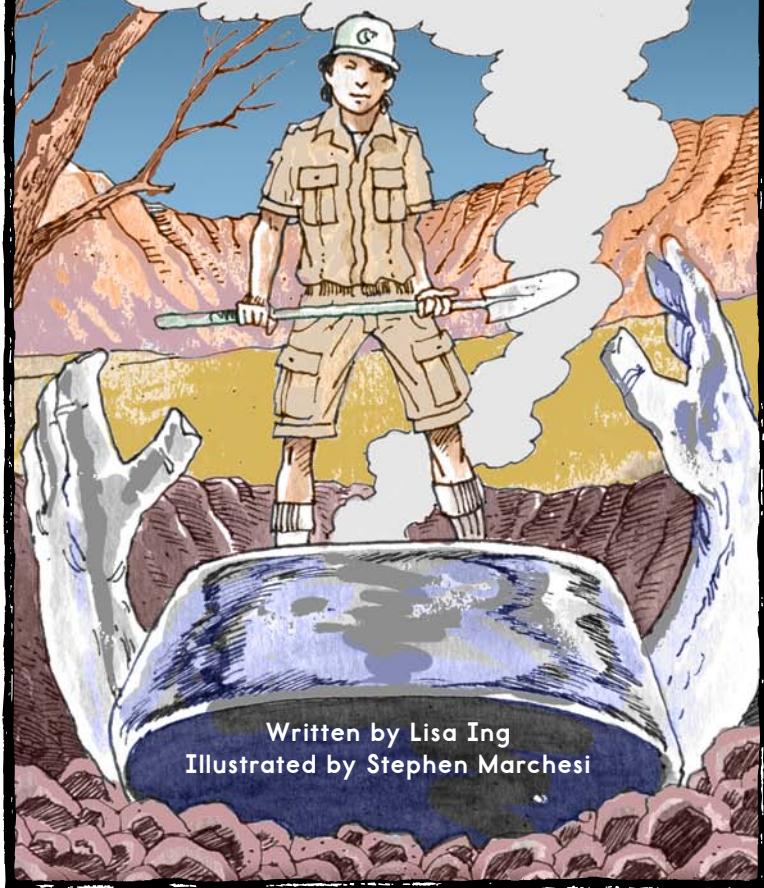


LEVELED BOOK • P

Inside the Beast



Written by Lisa Ing
Illustrated by Stephen Marchesi

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Ahead of me, the great beast roared from the pit. It seemed to be in pain. Its huge mouth opened and closed quickly again and again. A **stench** came from within.

“Atenga, what is that thing?” I asked my guide.

“It feeds the group, Wanderer of the Wastes. It is our **protector**, the Great Ice Beast Egdirf, from the frozen north.”

I stepped forward toward the edge of the pit. Below, the skin of the creature lit up like silver moonlight dancing on black water. The guide hung back, fear in his eyes.

The beast roared again, its stench and pain filling the air.

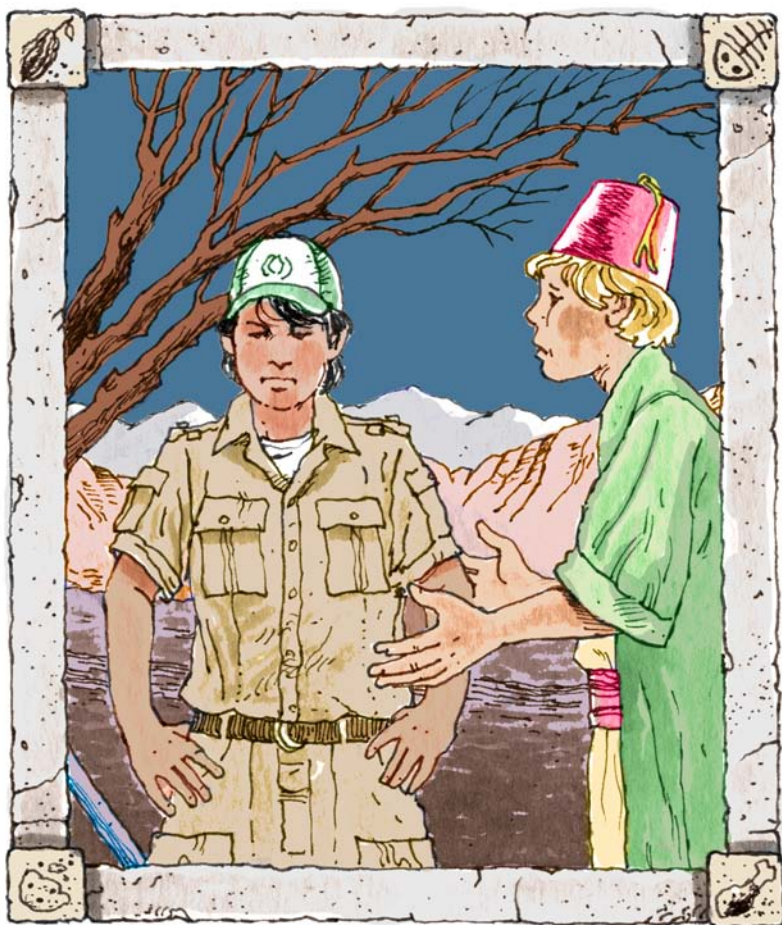
“What do you do with it?” I asked the guide.

He replied, “We feed it, and in return it feeds us. We place food inside its mouth. The beast will protect what is placed inside it from the desert heat. We then feed from it like fleas from a dog. When we’re done, we leave the **leftovers** for the beast.”

“Well, something has made it sick,” I said. “I can tell from the stench that it’s ill.”

“Wanderer, what are we to do?” Atenga cried. “Without the protector we will waste away to nothing.”

I turned to him, my jaw set. “Someone’s got to get in there and **remove** the cause of the illness.”





Atenga turned and ran. This probably wasn't the first time the beast had been ill. I almost left my guide and his brothers to their fate. Without the ice beast's powers, their stores of fresh food would go bad in the desert heat. The beast would soon infect all that it protected. The food would be covered in blooming black **mold**.

But . . .

I sighed. The ice beast did not **deserve** to be eaten alive from the inside. Its only crime had been to protect food for Atenga and his brothers.

“All right, I’m coming in there,” I said to the beast.

Its mouth opened wide and all became still and quiet.

“What have they done to you now?” I asked.

The stench filled my nose and mouth as I reached inside the beast’s jaws. My eyes began to tear. I started to scrape orange gunk from the beast’s insides. The gunk was old fruit that had **rotted** and **oozed** over everything.





Next, I found what someone might have made for breakfast once. It was hard English muffins, a jug of sour milk, and more old fruit. I found someone's leftover lunch, too. It was goopy chicken soup, a dried quesadilla, and many fruit cups. I removed it all from hidden corners. The worst was yet to come.

I found cherry tomatoes covered with black mold. Then I found a box of Caesar salad smelling of rotted fish and greens. Last, but not least, I found a chunk of steak coated with thick, fuzzy ooze tucked into the far corner of the great beast's jaw.

I pulled out all this food and threw it away from the beast's pit. The Great Ice Beast Egdirf almost purred. Its breath was clean and fresh again.



Atenga met me as I came out of the pit. He had a **hangdog** look on his face that made me feel better. I was tired from the hard work.

“Came back, did you?” I said.

“Yes, it was our beast. We should not have let you go in alone,” Atenga replied.

“So, are you going to let it get sick again?” I asked. I gave him the evil eye, shaking goo from my left hand.

“No, we will take better care of the beast,” Atenga said.

I wiped the goo on a tree. “What are you going to do?”

“We will put in the beast only what we can take out. We will not fill the beast with leftovers that won’t be eaten. Those who do not follow the rules will receive no food from the beast, but must feed it all the same.”



Glossary

deserve (<i>v.</i>)	to have a right to something; to do something worthy of a good or bad consequence (p. 6)
hangdog (<i>adj.</i>)	sad or guilty (p. 10)
leftovers (<i>n.</i>)	food that was not eaten in a meal and was saved and served again (p. 4)
mold (<i>n.</i>)	a type of fungus that causes the breakdown of other living things (p. 6)
oozed (<i>v.</i>)	to have a liquid slowly flow (p. 7)
protector (<i>n.</i>)	something that keeps others from harm (p. 3)
remove (<i>v.</i>)	to take away from (p. 5)
rotted (<i>v.</i>)	to have broken down through the action of a fungus or bacteria (p. 7)
stench (<i>n.</i>)	a really gross smell (p. 3)

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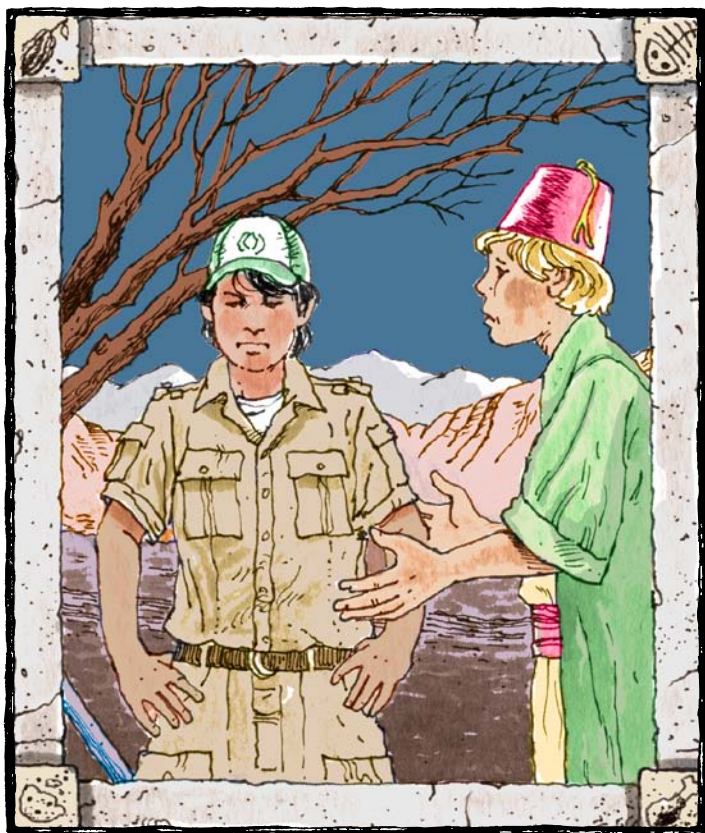
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