

WHAT LIES INSIDE

By: Ray Ochotta

Artwork by: Nico Wang

Leo would say he had a good job. It paid well, it didn't require too much thinking,

Leo would say he had a good job. It paid well, it didn't require too much thinking, and all he really needed to do was show up. When he clocked in to guard the black-iron Gate, he did it well, no matter how eerie the atmosphere was. Unlike his coworkers, he took the job seriously, and that meant not being a spineless coward. Leo was a forthright, strong-minded man, and he knew that for a fact.

As he was standing vigil at the Gate, he kept one hand in his coat by his hidden gun and the other by his side. The trees near him shivered, his hair tousled by the hidden breeze. The inky-black sky showed neither a moon nor clouds, almost as if he was on the inside of a large, domed ceiling. Leo's shift was almost over, and while his mind was getting a little tired, he didn't let it show.

"Hey!" A figure wearing a black overcoat approached, waving energetically. It's Keith, one of his coworkers, "Shift change time!"

"How do." Leo greeted.

Today, Keith was flanked by two more of their coworkers. Leo's eyes flicked

between them. This was abnormal. All three of them looked different than usual. The entourage was scruffy and unshaved, while Keith seemed to have lost a lot of hair. His eyes were also a deep brown, but Leo could swear they used to be grey.

"What's with them?" Leo asked.

"Some of your paperwork has a huge issue in it, and the boss wanted you to take a look." Keith said. "They're here to sub in."

Leo considered this. While the whole affair was abnormal, there would still be people guarding the Gate, so there shouldn't be any problems. "Alright," He decided. "Keith, let's go look at the issue." The others, cowardly as usual, agreed quickly and moved into position. Their hands remained outside their coats.

The two traipsed along the cobblestone path towards the little shed that held their auxiliary items and paperwork while Keith attempted to make conversation. Leo paid him no mind, only interested in fixing the problem before heading home. They stepped into the little building, wood creaking as their heavy boots crossed the threshold.

"Where's the problem, then?" Leo asked. Keith fiddled with his keys, opening a drawer. The shuffle of papers was a small, intimate noise compared to the groaning of the shed as it shook in the wind. "Wind's strong tonight," Leo remarked.

"I wouldn't know," Keith said, handing over the papers. "Here's the issue. Your name wasn't signed here."

Leo leafed through the papers. Tax form, proof of employment, social security... What was this last one? It seemed medical. Something's strange.

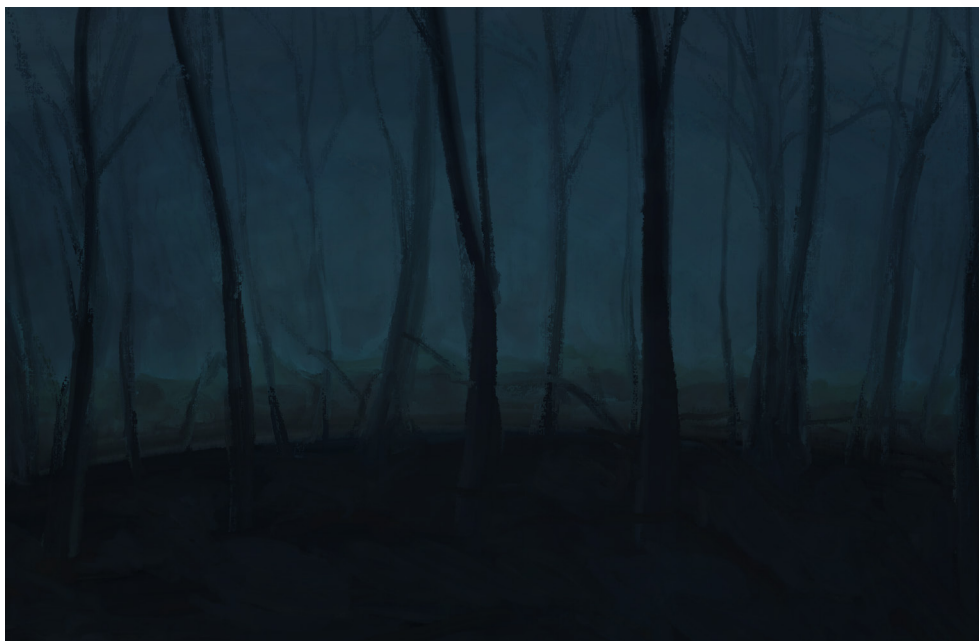
"What's this form for?" Leo looked up, prepared to ask Keith more questions.

Keith was gone.

Leo's heart rate spiked as he looked around. "Keith?" No answer. The shed continued to croak in the wind, but there were no other sounds. Leo tucked the papers into his inside pocket, then drew his gun. He opened the door, stepping outside, a high-pitched whining noise escaping from its hinges. "Keith, you out here?" No answer. Leo looked left, then right. The trees, painted in quick, inky strokes, looked back at him in the dim lamplight emitting from the shed. "That spineless coward," Leo muttered. He must have abandoned his post at the first sign of something going wrong. *But there wasn't any sign of things going wrong.* Leo frowned. He lit his personal lantern and began walking back to the Gate. The darkness of the forest that gathered towards him was fought back by the yellow glow of the lantern.

A squelching sound emitted from behind him.

"Who's there?" Leo spun, pointing his gun into the dark forest.



Black tendrils seemed to extend beyond his shadow, lengthening in the silence. Footsteps sounded to his left, and he turned to look, gun aimed at head height. But there was no head to meet the end of his barrel; just a white, clean spine. Where the head normally would be on a body, there was nothing. The spine, bereft of its entrappings— muscle, sinew, bone— attached itself to a still-fleshy pair of legs and a muddled pile of flesh in front of it with a balding head at the bottom. Looking closer, he noticed that the pile of flesh attached wantonly to the bottom seemed to be precisely cut down the center to reveal the insides of a human chest, as if it had been unzipped. Every step the thing took forward was accompanied by a chorus of wet, slurping noises and the light clicking of the spine moving. Revulsion threatened to crawl out of Leo's throat as he gagged.

With a start, Leo remembered himself. He shot twice, once at the barely-hanging-on head and the other at the top of the pelvis. His aim was true. The bullets sank into its flesh, drawing blood, but it continued to amble on sedately towards him.

Leo was not a coward, but this was a monster beyond human comprehension. He turned, running towards the relative safety of the other two guards and the Gate. He kept his head and lantern held high as he rushed through the dark forest, wind whipping through his hair while his lantern remained lit.

His steps slowed into a light jog as he approached the warm lamplight that was by the Gate. No one's guarding the Gate! *The cowards have fled*, Leo surmised. He could hear the wet, sloppy sound of fleshy blobs moving against each other, lubricated by the former body's stomach acid. The monster was right behind him. He hung his lantern on his side of the Gate, raising his gun once more. He's making a stand here.

Three monsters shambled out of the dark forest. Where did the other two come from? Leo raises his gun, unsure of what to do. He couldn't fend off one, what more could he do?

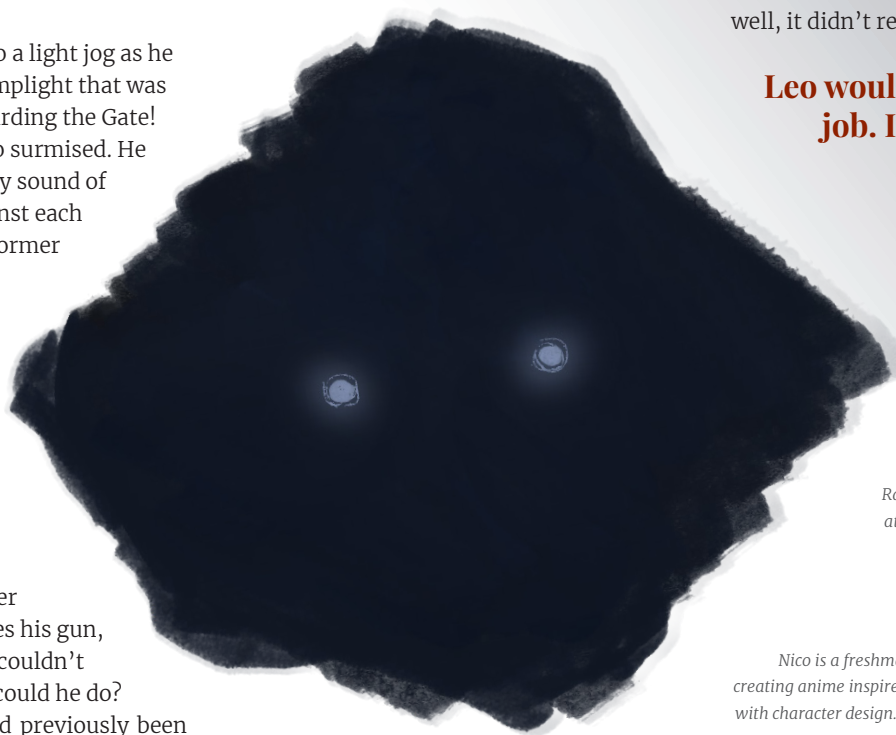
The wind, which had previously been unable to affect his lantern, now picked up, snuffing out all of the lights around the

Gate. In the dim light of the starless sky, Leo shouldn't be able to see anything. But he sees the dark tendrils that extended from his shadow earlier surge from his location outwards, painting the ground darker and darker. The monsters emit a high-pitched keening sound as they begin to sink into Leo's Shadow, burbling unpleasantly as they're wrapped in a dark cocoon and absorbed into 'It'.

The lantern flickers to life. Darkness still stains the cobblestone, and the iron-wrought Gate stands strong. Leo could see again. Something in him told him to check the previously discarded paperwork. His trembling hands reached into his coat pocket, fishing out the suspicious medical paper.

Do not let L-30 out of your sight. Do not let him see you enter the dome from outside the gate. There is a chance anomalies will spawn if the host discovers logical errors in our imprisonment. Forget yourselves: you are his coworkers: Keith, Mark, and Tom. Have him sign this form, and you will go free. Escape will result in a return to death row. Failure will result in death.

I am a spineless coward: Signed,



"So I'm the monster?" Leo muttered shakily. "I created those—"

"Hush." An inky tendril reached up, covering Leo's eyes. The voice vibrated through his whole being, leaving him unsure of its origin. "*Let's try this again.*"

Leo would say he had a good job. It paid well, it didn't require too much thinking...

Leo would say he had a good job. It paid well, it didn't require too much thinking...

Ray is a senior majoring in Computer Science at CAS and Game Design at Tisch. They enjoy writing, drawing, composing, and coding. This is their first time writing horror, and they hope it was unpleasant and evocative.

Nico is a freshman in Gallatin at NYU. He enjoys creating anime inspired digital art and experimenting with character design. He is interested in bats, human behavior, and storytelling.