The Morning Report
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“The Morning Report” won the 48-Hour Short Story Competition of the 2021 Create the Summer Series, an online arts festival celebrating and inspiring creativity in Niagara, organized by Create Niagara.

Blinking against the first few threads of grey light permeating the dawn, I stretch slowly, willing my stiff joints into action. My watch is almost at an end. Another hour and I will surrender my responsibilities. Until then our colony is in my care and I must maintain vigilance. Dark outlines are forming outside as slowly the rays of light reach the earth below. I cannot make out each shape in its entirety, but all is quiet for now. I stand and move silently from the window; it is time for another perimeter check. Generally, I like to perform a perimeter check every few hours unless there is a disturbance. Still, it wouldn't be proper form to hand over my duties without being able to make a detailed report to my fellows.

My first stop is a check on our food stores. Rations have been low these past weeks and even now there is a low, hollow, aching in my stomach. When I arrive, I see that things are still barren, which means our expedition team hasn't managed to return with any supplies. I sigh heavily, wondering how long it has been since I've experienced being truly satiated. There have been numerous expeditions off base in the past 48 hours alone, I cannot fathom how all of them managed to return empty-handed. Hope is dipping, morale is low, and one wonders how much longer we'll be able to cope under such conditions. If the Colonel were still with us things never would have deteriorated to such a state.

The Colonel was my mentor. Strong and efficient, she kept the teams running smoothly and the colony functioning at top capacity. She had no tolerance for tardiness nor sloppiness, and made it known she would accept nothing less than the best from her fellows. We depend on one another for survival after all. Though not quick to anger, I recall fondly the flash in her green eyes before you knew the storm was about to burst forth. Yes, she was an incomparable leader, overflowing with respect for our team and expecting the same in return. Lost on an expedition, the Colonel left with two of our other fellows on what should have been a simple supply run. Three left the safety of the colony, and only two returned.

Many tears were shed, but in the weeks that followed I was never able to discern the details of the Colonel's demise from the survivors. I considered organizing a rescue mission, but the state of the survivors simply didn't allow for it. Besides, it was clear from their story that there was no hope. Whatever had happened that fateful day, the Colonel was lost to us. We had to carry on,

and so that very night I took up her mantel of night watch. Each night, patrolling the borders, ensuring that disturbances are dealt with swiftly, and alerting the others of danger. The Colonel may be gone, but she lives on in me, and I will not let her down.

My thoughts return to me quite suddenly, shaking me out of my stupor. I realize I'm still standing in front of our empty stores. Time is getting away from me, and I must move on to complete my patrol before the others arrive. As I turn to leave, I note for the record that at least our access to water seems plentiful, a positive note in my otherwise lackluster report.

Continuing on my designated route (the very same I learnt from the Colonel) I camouflage myself in the shadows. It is important to maintain absolute stealth on patrol, not only to surprise intruders, but also to avoid disturbing our fellow residents. One must not raise an alarm unintentionally and create unwanted panic. Best to be certain, be careful, be vigilant. I stop at each darkened corner, each place where the walls intersect, and listen closely. The silence is complete and overwhelming. The dark would be impenetrable to lesser eyes, and I am thankful once more to the Colonel for her training.

In the final stretch of my journey, I detect a noise and stop dead in my tracks. The sound is a low rumble, followed by a higher pitched squealing. It's coming from the next room. My mouth goes dry, and my heart starts to speed up. If something has penetrated the walls this will be a full-scale emergency, I will need to sound an immediate alert. Moreover, I need to be prepared to fight. There has never been a fight in which I have not emerged victorious, though I never conflate victory with achievement. Bloodshed is not something I enjoy, nor do I cherish the notion of my more fragile fellows having to bear witness to a brutal report. Yet, this is my home, and I will defend it, for all of us.

Approaching the source of the sound with the utmost concentration, each step is deliberate, each breath slowed to silence as I search it out. The sound grows louder and more belligerent as I approach. I am certain whatever is making it must sense my presence. The squeal morphs into a sickly wet wheeze, the rumble a gruff sort of scowl. When I am almost upon it, I spend a few moments steeling my courage. Then, like a moving nightmare, I spring out at the sound, ready to face what may come.

It is only the Captain!

The sorry old man has fallen asleep again outside of his quarters. From the looks of him, he got too caught up in his own last meal and fell asleep on the spot. Deep, rumbling snores are churning in his chest, emerging from his stumped nose as a low wheeze. A dribble of drool is emitting from the corner of his deflated jowl. I don't bother to try and wake him, there's simply no point. Full light has begun to stream through the morning now, and he'll rouse soon enough. The Captain was never one of our swiftest or most resourceful team members, but he was a dear friend to the Colonel, and a comfort to our fellows in times of need. He serves his purpose well. I let him lie with a bemused smile and continue on.

My patrol is completed, the sun has risen. I wait for my fellows for several minutes, and when they fail to arrive, I make my way to their quarters for the hand off. The door is closed tightly,

and from inside I can hear the sounds of even breathing. They've overslept, and not for the first time. The Colonel would never stand for such behavior. Without any preamble I call out, clearly and firmly, and begin to deliver my full report.

Joe rolls over in bed with a groan and shakes his wife gently awake.

"Clarissa. Clarissa. That cat of yours is howling at the door again! Really, I don't understand how you sleep through this nonsense every morning." Clarissa yawns and stretches.

"His food bowl is likely empty again. I'll go fill it and he'll quiet down." She smiles sleepily. "Just think of him like an overeager alarm clock." Joe grunts and tries to bury his head beneath the pillows.

"One that goes off an hour before my alarm. Every. Day."

"Well, I'll go feed him and you take Cappy outside for his morning constitutional. He's not the young pug he once was, and the vet doesn't think he should be going down the back porch steps on his own anymore."

"Yes, dear."

The team finally emerges as I finish my report. They're late, again. I'm not worried though, a few more weeks and they'll be tuned up like clockwork. For the moment, my watch is ended. I head to my spot by the window and rest for the day, safe in the knowledge that I've kept my colony secure for another night.