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THE WAR OF DOGS AND BOIDS

A Coyote Story

by

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This is the story of how the dogs of Coyote chased the boids from Liberty, and thereby saved the lives of their human companions. It is a tale of bravery and sacrifice, of courage and vigilance ... and no human will ever know it, for only the dogs are aware of all the facts, and they speak in ways that transcend human awareness.

Dogs have their own society. From since the time before the beginning of recorded history, when wolf cubs who lurked around the refuse pits of human encampments overcame their primal instincts to allow themselves to be approached by the nomads who'd entered their domain, canines have roamed together as pack animals, forming their own hierarchies, their own mores and social codes. They have communicated with one another through growls and yips, barks and howls, yet their means of expression has never been limited to mere language. A certain gleam in the eye is all that separates friend from foe, just as a squirt of urine upon a tree trunk is a more effective means of asserting territory than a hundred-page treaty. Humans spend

vast amounts of time and energy trying to determine sexual availability; for dogs, a quick sniff of the hindquarters is all that it takes for one to decide if the other is of the opposite gender and whether they're receptive for mating. The rules of the pack are simple. The old and weak are protected by the young and healthy. Offspring are protected at all costs. Loyalty is lifelong; treachery is unforgiven.

Little has changed after the long-forgotten day, countless millennia ago, when the first orphaned wolf cub, wary yet famished, allowed himself to be lured into camp by a two-legged intelligent enough to see the potential benefit in befriending a wild animal. Over the course of time, descendants of that lonesome cub were domesticated, crossbred, trained, and beloved by their two-legged patrons; in exchange, they received food, warmth, shelter, and companionship. And yet, even then, the dogs have been a breed apart. In ways seldom understood by their human companions, they've continued their ancient ways, obeying primal instincts that have confounded the best efforts of scientific observers. The rules of the pack.

So dogs traveled across oceans and continents, bearing silent witness as their mentors explored and settled the distant frontiers of the planet they shared. And when humankind went to the stars, they brought dogs with them.

Which is how Star came to Coyote. A medium-size mutt -- part Rhodesian ridgeback, part pit bull -- he'd never known life on Earth, save as an fetus removed from his mother's womb during her last month of pregnancy, to be placed in hibernation for the long journey to 47 Ursae Majoris aboard the URSS *Alabama*. Star wasn't the only dog to be selected for humankind's first interstellar voyage, nor were dogs the only animals to make the trip; also placed within biostasis were fetal-stage sheep and goats, along with dozens of embryonic chicken eggs. Mission planners determined that cats were much too dependent to be useful to a fledgling colony, just as

cattle consumed too much grazing land for such relatively little return. But dogs ... oh, yes, dogs had long-since earned their right to settle a new world.

So Star left Earth as little more than an unborn pup, suspended within a milky fluid inside the aluminum tube that bore his original name: ST7456-R. It took the *Alabama* 230 years to make the journey to the fourth moon of the third planet of the 47 Ursae Majoris, and nearly a year after that before the commanding officer, R.E. Lee, determined that the colony was stable enough to support livestock. Yet the day eventually came when the small cell containing ST7456-R was loaded into the machine that decanted his tiny form, combined it with biosynthesizers, and eventually produced a small, squealing puppy. Someone noted the tiny white splotch at the tip of his tail and the comet-like streak at the end of his nose, and so he was given his name.

But Star was just a word by which two-leggers chose to address him. He eventually learned to answer to it, yet among the six other dogs who also survived the long voyage to Coyote -- three didn't -- he was known as something else. His true name, his dog-name, was impossible to translate into any human language, for it was communicated not by sound or written alphabet, but rather by odor: a complex chain of organic acids and proteins, relayed by sweat, piss and anal odor, that was as unique among his kind as fingerprints were among humans. In human language, other dogs might have called him Short-Fur-Barks-Loud-Runs-Fast, but even that was only an approximation. For lack of better elucidation, his name was Star; he liked the sound of it, even if he had no idea what it meant.

For the first eight weeks of his life, Star lived in a pen with the other puppies, none of whom looked like one another, yet who regarded themselves as litter-mates. The humans who fed them with squeeze-bottles of reconstituted milk during their infancy had given them names; there was Geronimo, a German shepherd, and Trixie, a white lab, and Dexter, a border collie,

and Sally, an English terrier, and Barney, a golden retriever-collie mix, and Rayn, a beautiful Irish setter who was the favorite among the humans. Among the dogs, of course, they had their own names, and as usual within a pack, there was some initial feuds and fights until they sorted out who was the leader. To no one's surprise, that turned out to be Geronimo, mainly because he was the largest and most aggressive of the males. However, Sharp-Teeth-Howls-At-Night wasn't a bully; once he marked his territory by peeing in the corner of the pen that caught the most sunlight during the day, he was willing to make friends with the others. Star and Geronimo became close pals, and spent their free time playing dog games: chasing each other around the colony's log cabins, splashing through the creek that lay near the settlement, having contests to see who could bark the loudest.

Yet their lives were not carefree forever. Coyote was an Earth-like world, yet it wasn't Earth. Although the colony of Liberty had become self-sustaining by the time Captain Lee allowed the dogs to be decanted, food was still scarce; more often than not, the dogs survived on a gruel of corn mash, nutritious but not the carnivorous fare their bodies instinctively desired. And as soon as they were old enough, the dogs began to be trained for their principal task, protecting the farm fields from the native creatures that emerged from the surrounding savannah to feed upon the crops.

The last wasn't so much a job as it was a game. Swampers were easy; little more than large rodents, they were defenseless against dogs that could sniff out their whereabouts from fifty feet away and kill them with a single bite to the back of the neck. And they were good to eat, too; Rayn was the best hunter, and she quickly became plump from all the ones she knocked off (which only added to her desirability, for among male dogs nothing is more sexually attractive than a fat bitch in heat). Swoops were more difficult; large, broad-winged birds, they'd long-since preyed upon swampers, and more than once tried to do the same with the puppies

until they grew too large for them to carry away. None of the pack ever managed to kill a swoop, yet they learned how to scare them away by barking and baring their teeth while they circled above the fields. The hardest opponents were creek cats; even after the dogs grew to full size, they were still only slightly larger than the felines, who'd back down only if they were circled by two or three dogs. The humans didn't like creek cats any more than the dogs did, though, and after awhile the dogs learned that all they had to do was use their snouts to point out where a cat was lurking in the high grass until a human could dispatch it with a rifle.

Yet, by far, the most menacing animals on Coyote were the boids.

Few humans ever saw a boid and lived to tell the tale, or at least until automatic guns equipped with motion-detectors and infrared heat-seekers were established around the colony perimeter. Yet the dogs knew all about them; late at night, as they curled up together for warmth, they'd hear high-pitched cries from across the grasslands. Sally, Barney, and Dexter would whimper and huddle closer to the others for comfort, while Geronimo, Trixie, and Rayn would bark in response, warning the unseen menace to keep its distance or face the wrath of the pack.

Star remained silent, obeying the wisdom of the pack leaders. He didn't want to challenge what he couldn't see, and it'd become clear to him that even the humans, despite their guns and godlike omniscience, were just as fearful of these creatures as he was.

Yet more than once, in the early hours of the morning, when Bear hung above the colony, its rings casting a wan silver glow upon the savannah, he'd be awakened by a strange avian scent. Raising his head, he'd look around to see, not far away, a pair of cold eyes reflecting the planetlight, regarding him from the tall grass just beyond range of the perimeter guns.

The boids were out there. Waiting for him to venture into their territory.

* * *

Late spring slowly bloomed into early summer, and the day finally came that the pack was separated from one another. The dogs had become full-grown by then, and the pen they'd shared since puppyhood was no longer large to hold them comfortably. Besides, Rayn was pregnant with Geronimo's offspring, and Sally had been recently humped by Dexter; it was time for everyone to go their separate ways.

One by one, colonists came over to the pen and picked out the dogs they wished to adopt. Or at least that was what they thought they were doing, for the fact of the matter is that dogs adopt humans as well. A human looks into a pen mobbed with mutts happily barking and climbing on top of each other, and believes they're all vying for attention, and in some ways that's true; a dog isn't happy until he has a two-legger for company. But the dog has a choice in the matter, too, and it's not until they look deep into the eyes of a human, and perceives a glimmer of the soul within, that he or she decides whether they've found the person they want to love and protect for all the rest of their days. This is one of the most binding moments in all creation; a human may simply take a dog, of course, but unless the dog has found the right companion, they will never be close friends.

In Star's case, he found Carlos Montero.

It was a good match, because Carlos himself was also an orphan. His parents, Jorge and Rita, were killed by a boid on the third day after the colonists arrived on Coyote. Carlos and his younger sister Marie were temporarily adopted by another couple, Jim and Sissy Levin, yet as soon as he passed his sixteenth birthday, Carlos moved out of the Levin home, taking his sister to live with him in a log cabin built for them by the other colonists. Even for one so young, Carlos was always independent; the Levins already had two sons, Chris and David, and he didn't want to continue to be a burden upon them.

So Carlos became Star's human, although Carlos certainly believed, as humans tend to, that it was the other way around. Star slept beside Carlos's bed, often sneaking up in the middle of the night to curl up at his feet, and in the morning he patiently waited for his friend to make him a kibble of corn mash for breakfast, on occasion mixing in some chicken giblets. Then they would go out to the fields, where each of them had their tasks; while Carlos plowed and weeded and spread seeds, Star would remain vigilant for swampers, swoops, and creek cats. And just as Carlos had friends his own age – Chris and David Levin, Barry Dreyfus, and Wendy Gunther, with whom Carlos was becoming increasingly close – Star also saw the rest of the members of his pack, who'd also adopted Carlos's friends as their companions.

In the afternoon, once the chores were done and everyone had lunch, the teenagers would go to Dr. Johnson's house, where they spend the rest of the day in school; although the colony was still struggling to survive, it'd been decided that the kids would complete their education. This left the pack on their own, at least for a few hours. Some would find a sunny place to take a nap, while others would aimlessly roam Liberty looking for something to do. And some would go hunting.

Like Geronimo and Rayn, Star had developed a taste for swampers. He'd learned how to stalk them through the marshes that surrounded the settlement, catching their scent and following it until his ears picked the faint sound of them moving through the sourgrass. Geronimo and Rayn made good hunting buddies; for hours on end, they'd prowl the edge of Liberty, sometimes catching and killing as many as a half-dozen swampers a day. Star once tried brought one home to Carlos as a gift – after all, if they were good enough for him to eat, why shouldn't his human miss out on a good meal? – but Carlos didn't seem to appreciate the gesture, even though Star had thoughtfully decapitated the carcass on his behalf. Well, so much the better: just more for Star to eat.

One afternoon, their tracks took them further into the savannah than they'd gone before, beyond the tripod-mounted guns established in a broad oval surrounding Liberty. The perimeter guns were programmed not to open fire upon anything more than fifty-four inches in height, so the dogs were safe from them, yet they neglected the danger of what the guns had been set up to protect the colony against. And that was their undoing.

It was only luck that Star didn't catch the swamper-scent; he was investigating a grasshopper nest, even though the tiny birds had already flown away. Yet Geronimo and Rayn had been searching the high grass only a few dozen yards away, their noses pressed close to the ground. When Rayn caught the smell of a swamper who'd just recently passed by, she bounded off in search of an easy catch, with Geronimo close behind. Star didn't know they'd left him behind until it was too late.

When he heard Rayn barking, he lifted his head, his ears perking up at the sound. From the timber of her voice, he knew that she'd just found something. An instant later, Star heard Geronimo bark as well ... only this time, it was his battle-cry, something he'd seldom heard before. Star's ears flattened against his head. For a moment he hesitated, then he dashed into the grass, heading in the direction of his friends' voices.

By then Rayn's bark changed as well, becoming more louder, high-pitched. She was afraid. And Geronimo sounded less brave; gone was his fearlessness, to be replaced by something more urgent. Even as Star heard it, he knew that Geronimo was calling for him.

He was almost within sight of his pack-mates when he heard a sharp, canine scream – Rayn's voice, raised in agony – that abruptly came to an end. Geronimo was still barking, more loudly than before, but now Star's nose caught a new scent: something darker, more threatening.

Star continued to barrel headlong through the tall grass. From the far distance, he caught the sound of human voices. For an instant, he thought he heard Carlos calling his name. He

pushed this to the back of his mind, though, as he raced to his friends, even as clingberry bush caught at his fur and shards of grass filled his mouth.

Then, suddenly, he came upon Rayn and Geronimo.

And the boid.

Six feet tall, the boid loomed over the two dogs. At first, Star thought it was nothing more than a giant chicken – dun-colored feathers, small vestigial wings, backward-jointed legs – but its enormous, parrot-like beak, dripping with blood, was enough to bring him to a sudden halt. This was a creature he'd never seen before, indescribably terrifying, its scent hitting him like an awful wave.

Rayn lay at the creature's feet, her life-blood splattered across the trampled grass. It took a moment for Star to realize that her head had nearly been torn from her body. Geronimo stood his ground only a few feet away; his fur was raised, his eyes narrowed and his teeth bared, yet his tail tucked between his legs. Lunging forward, then retreating a few steps to bark again, Geronimo was gathering his courage to attack the creature towering before him, while the boid rocked back and forth on its spindly legs, its beady eyes studying the large furry thing that dared to challenge it.

Growling in fury, Star broke from the high grass. Startled, the boid turned its massive head and snapped at him. Star dodged to one side, avoiding its massive beak; seeing that the boid was distracted, Geronimo hurled himself at the creature. His jaws sank into the side of the boid's neck; the giant avian screeched, and for a moment it seemed as if it was about to topple backward. But then it regained its balance; violently twisting its neck, it shook off Geronimo, sending him sprawling to the ground.

Then, before Star could do anything, the boid turned around, raised its right foot and, in one quick movement, slashed its talons across Geronimo's exposed belly. Geronimo howled as

blood jetted from his chest and stomach; he trashed upon the ground, trying to escape even though he was already dying.

Star leaped at the boid. He managed to nip the back of the monster's leg; foul-tasting blood and feathers filled his mouth, and the boid screamed in rage. Turning back toward him, the boid snapped at him once more, yet Star was too quick; he raced away, his four legs propelling him into the high grass.

He stopped, turned around. Geronimo was still back there; he had to protect him. But then he heard the boid screech again, and an instant later it hurtled through the grass, coming straight at him.

Star turned and ran for his life, with the boid in hot pursuit. Any thoughts of fighting this thing vanished; escape was his only chance for survival. Yet the boid was just as fast as he was; the tall grass would hide him for a few seconds. So Star ran as fast as he could, heading in the general direction of the settlement.

Blades of grass whipped past his face, blinding him; he tasted dirt on his tongue, felt humid air burning his throat. From somewhere nearby, he heard Carlos's voice, calling his name. Despite his terror, though, Star didn't dare lead the boid to his companion. So instead he veered away from Carlos, cutting through the marshland even as he heard the boid thrashing through the sourgrass only a few feet behind him.

Star didn't know it, but his flight brought him within range of one of the perimeter guns. He heard a whirr and a click, then suddenly an angry mechanical chatter filled the air. Another screech from the boid, only this time in pain.

Star stopped, looked around just in time to see the monster stagger upon its long legs as bullets ripped through its body. Tawny feathers and pink blood spewed in all directions. The boid cried out once more, then it fell backward, disappearing within the grass.

Panting hard, Star cautiously went back to where it had fallen. He stared at the dead boid for a long time, waiting for it to stop twitching. Once again, he heard Carlos's voice. His companion was trying to find him. Star moved away from the boid and drudged through the grasslands toward his friend. He needed someone to take him in his arms and ruffle his fur, stroke his ears and tell him that everything would be all right, that he was safe.

But the boid's blood was still upon his tongue, warm and salty. He had the taste of the creature in his mouth, and its scent was fresh within his nostrils.

And somewhere behind him, Geronimo and Rayn lay dead.

* * *

For the next several days, Star mourned the death of his friends.

So did the humans. Geronimo's and Rayn's companions retrieved their bodies from the grasslands and laid them to rest near the creek where they'd once frolicked. Yet as much as the two-leggers were upset by the savage demise of two favorite pets, their grief was nothing compared to that of the other dogs. Geronimo, after all, had been the pack leader; since their days in the puppy-pen, he'd been the alpha-male, the one to whom all the others deferred. And Rayn's death was even more tragic; only a few weeks away to giving birth to a new litter, her death signified the loss of a blood-line.

Dogs can't shed tears, or at least not as humans do, yet they can weep all the same. Instinctively, the remaining members of the pack closed together; although they continued to spend their nights in the homes of their companions, during the day they clung to one another, and were seldom apart for very long. No longer did they play tag or chase their tails, and when they followed their companions into the fields, it was only with great reluctance, their steps slow and their heads lowered.

Star was most disconsolate of all. For two days, he refused to leave Carlos's cabin, and even then only briefly, with his companion at his side. He ate only when he needed to, and without much appetite. Marie tried to interest him in playing fetch, yet he simply lay on his side, barely giving her a distracted thump of his tail when she'd toss a stick for him. When he slept, it was only fitfully; nightmares, unremembered when he awoke, caused him to growl in his sleep and his paws to twitch.

With Geronimo gone, the role of pack leader fell to him, if only by default. When he finally came out of hiding, he found the others waiting for him. They looked him in the eye and sniff his anus, and their tails, half-lowered yet nonetheless erect, would swish back and forth; they were waiting for him to do something. And although his dreams were still haunted by the awful memories of his narrow escape, a new emotion gradually replaced fear.

Rage.

Early in the morning, when the rest of Liberty was still asleep, Star would wake up to hear the boids. The one that had killed Geronimo and Rayn was dead, and yet he could still hear the awful cries of his brethren, coming to him from across the grasslands. Carlos never awoke to see his companion, sitting upright on the end of his bed, staring through the open window at savannah bathed by the ghostly light of the ringed planet hovering high above, nor did he ever hear the low growl coming the dog's throat as he searched the night for eyes that he instinctively knew were also searching for him.

All the same, something changed within his dog. Carlos didn't know it, but he was no longer the happy-go-lucky mutt he'd adopted only a few months earlier. Deep within his small heart, there now lurked the soul of an avenger.

A war had begun.

* * *

Early one morning, while Carlos was still getting ready for the day ahead, Star slipped out of the cabin. Most of the colonists were still having breakfast, so few people observed him, and those who did paid little attention to the small brown dog trotting down the dirt road leading through the center of town. At one point, Star heard Carlos and Marie calling for him; pausing for a moment, he glanced back in the direction of the cabin, wondering if he should be a *good dog* and *go home* (two human phrases which, with repetition, he'd come to understand). Yet he had a duty to perform, as dangerous as it may be, so instead he continued on his way, his head lowered and his tailing hanging low.

His steps brought him to the farm fields, and beyond its furrows of just-planted crops, the trackless grasslands into which he'd last ventured only a couple of weeks ago. Once again, he hesitated; for a moment, he remembered the fate he'd narrowly escaped, and with came an instant of fear. But he knew what needed to be done, so he quietly padded into the tall sourgrass, and began to hunt for the boids.

For hours he roamed the savannah, randomly moving back and forth through the high grass, his nose pressed close to the ground. It wasn't long before he passed the safe zone guarded by the perimeter guns; the weapons didn't even register his presence. The sun rose higher in the sky and the day became warmer; he slacked his thirst by drinking puddles of tepid water he found here and there, then continued his quest.

Star was almost about to give up when his nose caught a now-familiar scent; rank and ugly to his senses, it could only be a boid. It grew faint as he followed it to the east, closer to Liberty; as he'd come to suspect, the boids approached the settlement at night, when there was no one to see them, but stayed just beyond sensor range of the perimeter guns. But when he followed the scent to the west, away from the camp, it became stronger.

So that was the direction from which they'd come. Moving carefully, much as if he was stalking a swamper, Star began to track the boid away from Liberty. Now and then he'd stop, sniffing the air as he raised his ears, peering into the grass for any unusual movements. He knew that the boids could be lurking anywhere, and that they could see him before he spotted them. He had to be careful now; his life depended on his skills as a hunter.

The scent took him deeper into the grasslands, past clusters of ball plants and sprawling stands of blackwood trees. Swampers scurried away from him, and he had to resist temptation to chase them. But the boid-scent continued to grow stronger with every step he took, until it was almost overpowering; he came upon a small pile of turds, dark brown and ropy. A quick inspection told him that it had been left by his prey. He was close now, very close.

The trail led him to a dense clump of clingberry bushes; it was hard to see past them, yet it seemed as if the grass didn't grow as tall past the bushes. Crouching low to the ground, Star slowly crept closer, until he was able to peer through the thicket. And there, within a small clearing where the grass had been trampled close to the ground, was a boid.

The creature rested upon a thick mound of grass and cloverweed, its long legs folded beneath itself; its head was lowered to its chest, and its enormous beak tucked halfway beneath one of its wings. Star studied it for several moments before he realized that it was asleep; his mouth opened and his tongue lolled in satisfaction, but even that small movement was enough to cause the boid to stir. It sleepily raised its head and looked around, and Star froze, closing his mouth and remaining as still as possible. Satisfied, the boid went back to sleep.

Although he had the instinctive urge to attack the creature while its guard was down, Star knew that this would be unwise; the boid would become alert to his presence within seconds, and would kill him as soon as he got close. So he remained where he was, lying down upon his stomach while he continued to spy on his enemy.

After awhile, obeying instincts of its own, the boid woke up. Its head rose upon its long neck, and its beak opened to emit a high-pitched squeak that could only have been a yawn, then it slowly clambered to its feet. Turning around, it lowered its head again to peer closely at its nest. Then, apparently satisfied by what it saw, it marched off into the high grass, shoving through the clingberry bushes that hid its nest as if it was no more than a minor obstacle.

Star stayed where he was until he was sure that the boid was gone, then he raised himself from his belly and, ever so cautiously, eased himself through a break in the thicket.

Within the nest lay a half-dozen eggs, pale yellow and spotted with small reddish blotches, each nearly the size and shape of a football. Star had seen eggs before, in the coops where the chickens were raised; he'd also seen what came out when those eggs hatched, and once when he was a puppy he'd made the mistake of killing a few chicks, and had been spanked for it. But these eggs were different; they were not forbidden to him.

Carefully stepping into the nest, Star sniffed at the boid eggs for a moment, feeling their warmth with the tip of his nose. He prodded one with his right foreleg, and watched as it rolled over on its side. Then he opened his mouth, grasped it in his jaws, and clamped down hard. The shell resisted for only a moment before it shattered; he tasted yolk, oily and sour, and found something soft at its center. He tried to swallow the embryo, but it made him ill, so he vomited it and proceeded to the next egg.

It didn't take but a minute for him to destroy everything he found. A soft growl escaped his throat as he thrashed his way through the nest, crushing some of the eggs with his forepaws, biting others with his mouth. When he was done, Star raised his left leg and urinated long and hard upon the broken shells.

Then he leaped from the nest and dashed off into the tall grass, running as fast as he could for the safety of the settlement.

He'd just reached the safety of the nearest perimeter gun when, from the distance behind him, he heard an outraged shriek. Star stopped, gazed back in the direction in the direction from which he just come. He raised his hind leg again and pissed on the gun's tripod. Then, having marked his territory, he sauntered past the gun.

Revenge had never been more sweet.

* * *

Carlos was angry at Star for having disappeared all day, and scolded him when he finally returned home, yet the other members of the pack were impressed. One by one, they sniffed his fur with curiosity, catching the boid scent that lingered on his body; Star allowed Barney and Trixie to lick some of the yolk that had dried on his muzzle. These nonverbal clues revealed more than mere words could have possibly conveyed: Star had found a way to kill the boids.

And so, two days later, when Star once again stole away from the settlement, Barney, Trixie and Dexter went with him. Sally wanted to come along, too, but after much growling and many hard-eyed looks, she reluctantly stayed behind; as pregnant as she was, she was much too heavy to run fast.

The dogs went into the grasslands, and once again they picked up the scent of a boid and tracked it to a nest. This time, there was no adult guarding it; Star showed Barney, Trixie, and Dexter how to destroy the five eggs they found, then they fled back the way they came. But before they returned to camp, Dexter's nose picked up another boid-scent, and when they followed it, they came upon yet another nest. This one they demolished as well, and once again their work was undiscovered until after they reached the safety of the perimeter guns.

The dogs didn't know this – and neither did their humans, at least at the time – but they'd unwittingly timed their raids to coincide with the boids' annual spawning season, which occurred during the first month of Coyote's long summer. If they'd waited any longer, then the nests

would have been filled with newborn hatchlings that would have also been guarded more closely by their parents. Yet since boids often left the unhatched eggs alone during the day in order to go hunting, they became easy targets for the dogs ... and the boids hadn't yet adapted to the intrusion of four-legged aliens who could locate their nests through sense of smell and who, unlike swampers and creek-cats, hadn't learned to give them a wide berth.

Day after day, over the course of the next two weeks, the dogs sneaked away from Liberty during the early morning. It became easier to find the boid nests, but it was never less dangerous; more than a few times, a boid would spot them, and then they'd have to flee for their lives. But they presently learned how to detect the presence of the avians before the boids saw them; taking cover beneath clingberry bushes, they'd lay low until the creatures stalked past. They hunted as a pack, and never allowed themselves to be separated from one another.

As wars went, it was a silent one, conducted with secrecy and stealth. All the two-leggers knew of it was that the dogs would mysteriously disappear for hours upon end, only to come home late in the afternoon, their fur matted with clingberries. Star was often spanked by Carlos; he accepted his punishment with scarcely a whimper, frustrated that his human didn't understand what he was doing, yet satisfied by the quiet knowledge that he was protecting his companion.

And then, early one morning before the sun had risen, Star awoke to hear ... nothing.

Climbing up on Carlos's bed, he gazed through the open window, listening intently to the cool breeze as it gently drifted across the savannah. For the first time in his life, he didn't hear the mating cries of boids, and although he stared long and hard at the grasslands, he didn't see hostile eyes reflecting the light of the ringed planet far above.

When Carlos awoke a few hours later, he found his dog curled up at his feet, sound asleep. Giving Star a fond scratch behind the ears, Carlos told him that he was a good boy; Star yawned and stretched, then fell asleep again.

The colonists were puzzled for awhile as to why the boids that once haunted the grasslands around Liberty were suddenly no more to be seen or heard. Believing that the creatures had learned to avoid the perimeter guns, they congratulated themselves for their technological ingenuity. Never once did any of them seriously suspect that the dogs had anything to do with it.

And the dogs, of course, kept their own secrets.