

BUSTER



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Buster's Testimony



I've never been very good at the sit-and-stay. When I decided to become a fire dog, I was told over and over by humans and dogs to follow my orders and only my orders. Do the tricks. Never make my own choices. That's what makes a Good Dog.

And I believed it! I took it to heart and followed every rule as closely as possible to make sure I was the Goodest, most helpful, most fire-doggiest fire dog I could be. As a puppy, I imagined myself with one of those big red hats on my head, tugging a hose around in my mouth and carrying babies out of burning buildings.

Turns out that's not what fire dogs do anymore, if they ever did. "Sit for the picture, Buster!" they'd say. "Stay here and watch the station until we get back, okay, buddy?"

"Isn't he so cute in that little hat?" and "He's so lucky, getting to lie around all day."

"Such a cutie." Or the worst: "What a mascot!"

Mascot. I was a Good Dog who might as well have been a stuffed animal.

So I started chasing fires. I would listen in to where my humans were being sent, then sneak out on my own and try to help without getting caught. My team covered only a small area of the big city, so I could make it to the majority of emergency calls on foot.

Most of the time I could only help in small ways—every once in a while I'd sniff out a piece of important evidence and lead someone there, or I'd run along the perimeter and push people out of the danger zone. Usually, I would find humans after they'd been saved and comfort them the best I could.

The time I became Buster the Miracle Dog I was playing low-contact no-human Fetch (street rules) with some other dogs in the park, when I smelled smoke.

One sniff: Hungarian food. No, not that. Two sniffs: smoke. Definitely smoke from an active fire. Started with grease, maybe? Probably from a kitchen, mixed with—three sniffs—*Hungarian food*. The restaurant was on fire!

I didn't hesitate, didn't think about being a Good Dog. I dove in. By the time the rest of my team from the station had arrived, I'd evacuated the restaurant with some vigorous barking.

I was too lost in the action to remember most of it, and I thought the humans didn't see me do anything un-dog-ly, 'cause the smoke was thick and they were all

panicked. But afterward, a couple insisted that I had saved their baby from his high chair and carried him outside myself. I don't actually remember doing that, maybe I did, but either way, someone from the news listened to their story and came up with the name.

The concentrated smoke messed up my nose (it's a little farsmelled now), but I didn't mind being known as a Miracle Dog. My station was overjoyed, the treats flowed like rain, and it felt like the whole city wanted to shake my hand. But you know how it ended. Dog Court thought I was getting too much attention, hit me with several counts of Reckless Lassie Behavior, and quietly shipped me to Bellville, where nobody knew who I was.

I still think about my team, sometimes. Do they miss me? I guess they probably think I ran away. Just like Tonio will always wonder what happened, if I don't—

Never mind.

I was supposed to get adopted as a house pet. I was warned to stay out of sight, out of trouble, and make sure no one recognized me . . . but it sounded so *boring*. I looked for another chance to do a job, any job, and realized that humans selected service dogs from a shelter in town. Being a psychiatric service dog isn't exactly big news, so the judge let me try, as long as I promised I wouldn't make the same mistake again.

I was sure that I wouldn't. I really tried.

And then I met Tonio.



“What kind of dog is he?” An adult human with a dripping-wet black jacket, long curly wet hair, and tough-looking boots knelt down and inspected me. (This was Tonio’s mom.) I stood stiff and straight to look capable and serious.

My trainer, Jocelyn, shrugged. “He’s not any one thing. He’s got the ears and color of a vizsla, but there’s something smaller in him, too. Maybe a couple somethings.”

A man who was wearing a green uniform with a spaceship logo on it nodded while he folded his umbrella. “Some boxer, I bet.” (This was Tonio’s dad.)

“Sure, maybe.” Jocelyn shrugged again.

“Maybe poodle?”

“Mm, I don’t know about that.” Tonio’s mom tapped the toe of her boot absently on the mat to knock some mud off. “I could see some kind of terrier in there, but poodle?”

“I think definitely there’s some poodle.”

Booooooooriiiiiiiing! Humans *love* to talk about us like we’re not there. Not that I had much to add—I never knew my parents.

“What do you think, Tonio?”

I tilted my head to watch the boy. He was about eleven

human years old, with curly brown hair that normally hangs just above his eyes, but since it was wet and sagging from the rain, he was constantly pushing it out of the way. He said, “Can my parents get their money back if this doesn’t work out?”

“Oh, Tonio.” Mrs. Pulaski gave my trainer an apologetic look. “Don’t worry about that.”

“What if he doesn’t like me?” The boy stared at me with wide eyes, like I was absolutely terrifying. “Or what if I can’t take care of him the way you’re supposed to?”

Before the trainer could answer, Tonio’s mom spoke again. “That’s not anything you need to worry about, Tonio. We’ll figure that out if it happens.”

“But I—”

Mr. Pulaski cut in and started talking to my trainer. I watched Tonio tug at one of his dripping curls, and had an idea: an old trick I learned as a fire dog. Whenever a kid was scared of dogs, or nervous around me, I’d do something totally goofy and cute to help them calm down. I was sure the same thing would work here, so I jingled my collar for his attention.

He looked up right away. I did a big, exaggerated shake of my whole body, like I was the one who was wet.

Tonio didn’t get it. *It’s easy*, I thought. *Just shake off the water.* I took a deep breath and shook even harder, like a ghost had just passed through me and I had a chill

all the way down in my bones. *It's the fastest way to get dry, see?*

I saw it dawn on his face. His head tilted like a puppy's, and after a second, he shook his head, just slightly, and flung little droplets around. I wagged my tail and wiggled my body again. He shook his hair out harder and laughed.

“Did you hear that, Tonio?” His mom grabbed his attention, and my trainer began to explain the different ways I had been trained to help with his anxiety. I performed the ones she asked me to demonstrate and tried to look as professional as possible, but I spent the rest of the training session thinking about the rain-shaking moment we'd shared.

Most humans don't know how to talk. They can speak, sure, but any puppy with a few treats in front of them can *speak*. I could already tell that Tonio knew the most important part of really talking: paying attention. Every time he looked at anyone—the trainer, his parents, even me—he was watching them with so much focus. He didn't make as much noise as the other humans, but he listened, and he watched. I felt lucky to get paired with him.

“So try this,” my trainer said to Tonio, who was paying close attention. “Let's say you're about to have a panic attack and you want to get out of a room full of people. Just tap on your leg like this.” She tapped on her

leg and I broke my stance, whining and pawing at her ankle. “Buster will start pretending he needs to use the restroom. Then it’s easy for you to say, ‘Oh, just a minute, I need to go take my dog out.’ Now you try.”

My trainer handed Tonio the leash. He put his hand on his leg and repeated the tapping. “Like th—*achoo!*” He sneezed, but since he’d done the hand signal right, I whined again and pawed at his leg. He sniffled and didn’t even seem to notice I’d done anything—he was totally frozen.

“That’s great!” Jocelyn continued. “You can give him one of those treats as a reward.”

I perked up. As you know, it’s essential that, in front of humans, we pretend that food is the most important thing in the world, so I had to look excited at the word *treat*. Tonio nodded but didn’t move for the bag. Instead, he rubbed at his nose and stared off into the distance. He was starting to sweat, just a little, and I could hear that his breath was changing.

“Tonio?” His mom’s wet boots squeaked on the floor. “Are you all right?”

“I, uh, I don’t—I’ll be right back.” He made a straight line to the door with a very fast and serious walk.

Both of Tonio’s parents followed him into the hallway and shut the door for privacy. I, of course, could hear everything.

“I think I’m allergic to him. I must be allergic to dogs,”

the boy said. *So that's what this is about*, I thought. *The sneeze.*

"I don't think so, honey," his mom said. "We just took that allergy test, remember?"

Tonio was breathing fast, with just the top part of his lungs. He was almost panting, like I do after a long run. His voice was different—it was moving up higher, and quicker. Not slow and quiet like he'd sounded before.

"My nose feels weird," he said, then paused to gasp a few times. "I think it's . . . because of the dog. I can't breathe."

"Try to slowly take a deep breath." I could tell Mr. Pulaski was reciting advice he'd heard before, something he'd said a bunch of times. "We've been here for a while—if you had a severe allergy, it would have acted up sooner."

"Maybe not! Maybe—maybe—maybe it's because I held the leash for the first time. I touched him, and I'm allergic, and you already paid for him, and now—" His voice broke. He was crying.

That's when I realized he was having a panic attack. Jocelyn had pretended to have them so I'd know what they looked like, but I'd never witnessed a real one before. Because of his anxiety, Tonio was worrying more about his sneeze than most people would. He thought something was wrong with him, and that was making

him scared. The fear made him panic—and when someone panics, it's harder to breathe. Then when it got harder to breathe, he thought it was because of the sneeze. That convinced him the allergy must be really bad, which scared him more, which made his breathing even worse. A bad circle.

I tried to decide what a Good Dog would do. My training was to help when he was having a panic attack, but I was only supposed to respond to what I *saw*, not what I heard from another room.

But he was hurting. And if I could just go out there and distract him, maybe I could help. I could pretend I really *did* have to go out: The trainer would open the door, I could distract Tonio, and that would break the bad circle.

Then I thought about the fire. I thought about the trouble I'd already gotten into.

I couldn't risk it.

I'll help you next time, I thought. I laid down on the ground and tried not to hear him crying. *I promise*.

His parents seemed too flustered to help much. They kept asking if he was okay every few seconds, and if he needed to leave. He didn't, or couldn't, answer. I felt terrible. Jocelyn and I waited another five minutes, and I listened to his crying stop, his breath slow.

"I'm sorry," Tonio mumbled. "We can go back inside."

"You don't have to apologize, sweetheart. If this is

already bothering you, then it's probably a bad idea. We should stop."

Tonio gave in. "If you think so. Yeah. We can just go home."

I looked up at Jocelyn. She couldn't hear anything. She was just sitting there tapping on her phone while my new family walked away! I couldn't stand it anymore! I pawed at my trainer's ankle and whined. I tucked my tail down low. *I'm not pretending! Well, I am pretending, but I'm pretending to not be pretending! Listen to me!*

The trainer finally understood. "I guess it's time to check on them, anyway. Let's go." She grabbed my leash and opened the door. *Perfect.*

Tonio and his parents were getting ready to go.

"Heading out already?" Jocelyn asked.

Tonio's mom sighed. "I don't think this is going to work out."

"Are you sure?" Jocelyn gave them a concerned look. "What happened?"

I tugged my way over to Tonio and bumped up against his hand. I licked the back of his palm, and after a moment, he scratched the top of my head. I rubbed my face all over his hand while the adults talked and tried to hold his attention. I was betting that he wasn't *really* allergic, and hoped with all my heart I was right.

I stepped back just a little and shook my body again,

like I was wet. He shook his hair, and some of the last few drops sprinkled down. *Good! Yes! Now pay attention. Watch me.* I lifted my paw up and rubbed it along my nose.

He must have thought I was rubbing at the water drops or something, because he didn't do anything. I rubbed my nose, bumped the hand he had petted me with, then rubbed my nose again.

Tonio watched me, then looked at his hand. He tilted his head like a puppy again, took a deep breath, lifted his hand up to his face, and rubbed it all the way down, from his forehead to his chin.

I wagged my tail. *Good. Yes.* I touched my nose to his knee and took a looooooong sniff. He held his hand in front of his nose and took a deeeeeeeep breath.

"I didn't sneeze," Tonio mumbled. "I'm not allergic."

"What's that, honey?" Tonio's mom looked down at him. He was grinning.

"I didn't sneeze! I touched him all over with my hand, and then I touched my face, and I'm not even itching. I don't think I'm allergic, Mom!"

"Maybe not, but I still think we pushed you into this too quick. We should go home, talk about it."

Tonio shook his head. "I want to try. I want to take Buster home."

I wagged my tail. *Yeah, you do!*

"Ready if you are," Jocelyn said. She held the leash out.