

BUSTER

UNDERCOVER



Caleb Zane Huett



Scholastic Press / New York

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-54190-8

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

22 23 24 25 26

Printed in the U.S.A. 23
First edition, March 2022

Book design by Maeve Norton

Buster's Report

— 1 —

On my lawyer's request (hi, Lasagna), I've decided to use my extra time (and nervous energy, since Tonio isn't here) to type up everything that's happened since my Dog Court case over the summer. I'm not *technically* on pawrole, but he thinks having more evidence of our "success" as a human-dog duo will be helpful going forward.

I'm not sure this will be so cut-and-dried, though. Our semester has been complicated, and Tonio and I aren't exactly on great terms right now. So I'm going to be totally honest and let you edit it however you want, Lasagna. Maybe you'll find something useful in here. It'll at least help me gather my thoughts.

My name is Buster Pulaski (formerly Buster Vale, né Buster Stray), and I'm currently licensed as a psychiatric service dog specializing in anxiety and panic disorders. My human is Antonio Pulaski, and he's currently licensed as a sixth grader at Bellville Middle School. Both of us were recently made agents of The Farm, a secret branch

of Dog Court operating outside of Dog Law in order to ensure the safety and protection of dogs in a world where humans don't know that we're . . . well, people. (Am I allowed to say that in this report, Lasagna? I hope so. Again, delete whatever you want.) It feels like every dog on earth seems to know about what happened last summer, when Tonio found out the truth about me and, through me, *all* dogs, but the official story is that we're being closely monitored by Dog Court, and no one else is supposed to know about The Farm.

If you saw the court case, you know there was one teeny-tiny (okay, maybe kinda big) thing that I did in front of humans that got me arrested: I played Beamlade, the popular science fantasy trading card game for people of all ages, at a public tournament in front of a couple dozen humans. Whoops!

The rest of our summer was spent covering for that moment. I recruited a bunch of dogs at the shelter in town to pretend that Tonio could train them to play a card game designed for humans, planning to just show it off once or twice and let it fade away, but Mia Lin (the daughter of the shelter's owners and Tonio's best friend) saw potential for a scheme.

That's where this story really needs to start: At the Lin Family Dog Shelter's First Annual Official Beamlade Dog League Tournament and Adoption Day, featuring "genius dog whisperer" Tonio Pulaski.

The shelter was built into what was left of an old farm, from back when this part of town was all farmland. Mia's dad Jeff inherited it from his grandparents, and her other dad Danny is a huge dog lover. When they realized the nearest dog shelter was over an hour away, they repurposed the land, got all the permits and permissions they needed, and started collecting strays around Bellville. Of course, with just the three of them, they realized keeping all those dogs entertained was difficult—so instead of leaving dogs in cages all day, they opened the space as a dog park for everyone in town.

As I'm sure you know, Bellville changed overnight from a nowhere town to a *huge* hub of dog social life. Suddenly, it was easy for strays, pets, and service dogs to connect without being suspicious. The shelter was always packed with hungry dogs, and—for reasons I'm still not clear on—food costs money. The Lins' budget is always tight. Which brings me back to the tournament.

“Ref! We need a ref over here!” a man yelled across the dirt field. He stood up and waved in our direction. I was lying, belly in the sun, beside the kids working the event—Tonio, Mia (who I've mentioned), and Devon, the newest kid to join their grade and Tonio's other best friend. They wore matching sunflower-yellow shirts with the shelter logo, and Tonio had even cut one to wrap around my harness so I matched.

Tonio squinted in the sun and brought a hand up to

his forehead to shade his eyes as he looked for Skyler, the older teen who had a Beamlade judge's badge.

Devon nudged Tonio and said, "You should go-nio. You're the expert, and Mia's busy." He grinned before Tonio could raise an argument, red-blue-and-black braces (Spider-Man colors) proudly displayed. "Hurry!" he insisted. Tonio stumbled forward, curls flopping on the side of his head that wasn't shaved down. I rolled over and trotted along behind him.

Cardboard Beamlade battlefields were set up in rows down the field, and dogs were dueling against each other while humans monitored their progress and helped with the parts that required opposable thumbs, like shuffling. The battlefields were a perfected version of what Tonio and I had used for our first game together: low shields on either side so dogs could set down their "hands" without their opponent seeing, and a place in the middle for clashing heroes and fragile Spirit Batteries.

The haircut suits you, I underspoke as we walked toward the waving man. Tonio shrugged, but I could tell he was pleased to hear it. He'd drawn up the style himself and handed it to the hairdresser the day before; it was the first time I'd ever seen him show an interest in his "look," and I suspected it was because Devon was always talking about what he would do if he had Tonio's big curls.

“What’s the problem, sir?” Tonio asked the man while I underspoke *What’s up?* to the dogs. A small-for-her-age German shepherd named Bella was playing opposite a large-for-his-age tricolor collie named Mozart, who’d had a growth spurt over the last couple months. His face stretched out long to emphasize his permanently cocky expression, and the rest of him grew multiple feet longer. It’s always disconcerting when you stop watching a puppy for *one second* and suddenly they’re bigger than you! He was just as fluffy, though, and maybe even more irritating.

Don’t worry about it, old man, Mozart underspoke. I gave a dismissive tail wag at his answer and looked at Bella.

He’s cheating! The shepherd posed emphatically. *And he thinks he can get away with it because humans are watching.*

“They started growling at each other all of a sudden,” the man explained to Tonio. He looked nervous behind his reflective sunglasses, and his fingers fidgeted with the camera around his neck. “I don’t know if it’s because of the game or what, but I thought I should get someone.”

Tonio nodded. “I’m sorry if they scared you. Let me, uh, see what I can do.” He crouched down lower to the ground and looked at me.

She says Mozart’s cheating, I explained.

His hands came together in front of him and did a few quick movements in a way we'd practiced—his hands were ears, front paws, back paws, and tail in that order. It was slower than real Underspeak, but less obvious than imitating a dog in front of everybody.

Mozart, are you cheating? I translated for him.

No, Mozart huffed.

Yes, he is!! Bella gave a little bark of affirmation.

You're not? Tonio smiled. *Then what's the problem?*

The collie shrugged. *She's just mad that she's losing.*

I'm not even losing! With a smooth movement, Tonio held up a card and gave a treat to Bella, to fake like he was doing a training trick. He turned the card and showed it to Mozart.

The Phishing Rod needs energy from four Manabytes, though, and you've still only got three. So how'd this get on the field?

A flash interrupted us, and all four of our heads jerked up to see the man in sunglasses snapping a picture of us talking.

"Sorry!" He dropped the camera back down to his chest and held his hands up when he saw the expression on Tonio's face. "Seeing you training them is just so fascinating—I thought my daughter might want to see! But I can delete it."

Tonio's heart was beating fast, and I could see him thinking through it—what had he been doing? What

would his hands look like in the picture? Could we all be in trouble because of this random man? I placed a paw on his foot, and Tonio rested a hand on my head, nodding. “No, it’s fine. I was just . . . surprised. Thank you.” The man apologized again, and Tonio looked back to the dogs.

Mozart clamped his teeth down around the Phishing Rod card and pulled it away from Tonio, dropping it haphazardly back with the other cards in his hand. *I must have made a mistake.*

Uh-huh, I added. Mozart glared at me, and Bella wagged her tail triumphantly. Tonio scratched Mozart behind the ears and gave him a treat, too.

“It should be fine now.” Tonio gave one short nod to the man with the camera and started walking back to the other kids, but he’d barely turned around before the man was in front of him again.

“Actually, I have a question. What’s the process if I’d like to adopt one of these dogs?”

Tonio was still avoiding eye contact—he was a lot more comfortable talking to dogs than adults. “You can talk to one of the Lins. But just so you know, Mozart isn’t for adoption. He’s—”

“Oh, no, I saw on his tag. I’m interested in that dog over there.” Tonio followed the man’s pointed finger to a Shiba Inu who looked like she was furiously digging a hole at the edge of the field.

“Jpeg?” Tonio blinked, surprised. “Oh no. You don’t want Jpeg.”

The man was taken aback. “Why not?”

“She’s . . .” He looked down at me, and I gave him a sympathetic but unhelpful look in return. There was no way they’d let this guy take Jpeg. “High-energy? And she can’t be separated from Leila.” Tonio held his hand out to gesture toward the muddy part of the field, where the biggest dog in the whole park was wrestling loudly with a whole group of other dogs and winning.

“Oh, okay.” The man looked disappointed but stopped following Tonio and held his hand up in a good-natured wave. “Thank you!”

Tonio dipped his head goodbye again and made a few subtle gestures toward me. *There’s something weird about that guy.*

Really? I glanced back at the man, who was snapping a picture of another one of the Beamblade games—which tons of people were doing, including taking videos with their phones. *He seems normal to me.* I figured it was just Tonio’s anxiety talking.

After a moment, he shrugged. *Just a feeling,* he told me. I let it drop—probably anxiety, right?

I should have trusted that feeling.