

The Cyber Shelter

The two-leggers are back

“It’s that time again. The two-leggers are back to torture us with their baby talk and all their ‘Oooing’ and ‘Aaahing’. Most of us will be passed over like we’re so much techno-garbage. It’s the new models that get scooped up first. Usually by the smallest of the two-leggers - the ‘squeezers’. I remember - it was a long time ago - one held me so tight I almost went into sleep mode. Then the bigger one with the smooth head - probably mange - said to put me back. Didn’t like the way I was licking her face. ‘Filthy habit’, he said. ‘Spreads viruses’.”

“That was the last time anyone took an interest in me. I used to be affectionate. But no more. I’ve learned my lesson. Why make the effort? It just builds up false hope.”

Bouncer scratched behind his alloy ear with his hind leg at an imaginary rust spot. A program glitch. The no-memory-wipe cybernetic pet shelter was not to blame. The staff did a great job keeping the facility and its occupants in top shape. The last thing an adoption client wants to see is a corroded cyber pet.

The shelter’s mission was to average a ten day maximum stay for every unit that crossed its threshold. Keeping the potential pets clean and functioning was a fundamental tactic toward achieving that goal.

But Bouncer was an anomaly. He had been there for over a year. He was no longer a Beta-release model, so his adoption odds were low.

“Who cares if I get snatched up by one of these two-leggers, anyway. Two downloads a day. Nice bed. Easy access to the ethernet to defrag my files. I’ve got it made. Even the help around here treat me like a prince. The one they call Alice let’s me hang around the office when she’s here to volunteer. Says if only I had lips, callers could understand me and I could answer the phone.”

Then the chain-link door to the kennels opened with a shrill squeak.

“Here we go. Let the gawking begin. I’ll bet Daisy is the first to go. She’s quite the looker. A little French number. If I hadn’t been fire-walled when I got here, we could’ve networked to clone quite the litter. Nothing cuter than a half dozen or so *Jaques* Russells bouncing around, creating mischief.”

No doubt that’s how Bouncer got his name. And his reputation. Once a high energy Jack Russell model with a happy disposition and boundless energy, he proved to be more than several owners could - or would - handle. So,

he found himself returned to the cyber shelter after a few weeks - six was the record.

After the third failed adoption, and the insult by Mange Man, he had given up.

“Hello, what’s this? Why’s that squeezer sitting in an anti-grav chair? And what’s Alice saying to the bigger two-legger standing behind him?”

Billy sat there, glassy-eyed and dejected. He could hear, but wasn’t listening as his dad whispered to Alice.

“You see, my son’s gone through a lot. He had a bad fall on his hover board and damaged his spine. It’s been months. The doctors say physically, there’s no reason he can’t one day at least walk again. If he would just try. But he’s given up. He stays in his own little world. Barely speaks. I was hoping maybe having a pet would bring him out of his shell. But it needs to be a special one. Not a new release. Smart. Self-sufficient. Low maintenance. Not aggressive. Good humored. You know, to set a good example for Billy.”

Alice nodded, understanding. “I believe we have just the one.”

“Uh oh. I’m not liking this. What’s Alice up to? She keeps looking over at me as she’s talking to that two-legger.

Now they're coming this way. Why doesn't the squeezer get out of that thing and walk on his own? Whatever. It doesn't matter. I'm not going to let them ruin the good deal I've got here at the shelter. I'll put on my ugliest face. No wagging. No whining. I'll stare that squeezer right in the eye and let him know he's looking at the wrong dog. Especially with Daisy over there standing on her hind legs doing pirouettes."

The two adults with Billy arrived at the pen. Billy stared off in the distance over Bouncer's head.

"Here goes nothing. First, I'm going to look right at him. Ignore me will you? I'll get your attention. I'll turn my head first to the left like this and give him a right stink-eye. Hmmpf. Nothing. Then I'll turn my head slowly back to the right and give him a left stink-eye. Well I'll be. It's not working."

Billy's eyes flicked ever so briefly down at the dog.

"This is going to take some effort. How about if I pull my lips back and give him my best maniacal grin? Yeah, that'll do it."

Unseen by the adults, the corners of Billy's mouth twitched.

“Still nothing. I’m going to have to pull out *all* the stops. I’ll pucker up my lips, let my tongue hang out, and then shake my head like I’m shedding water. And to top it off, I’ll hop back and forth on my front and back legs. They’ll think I’ve got rabies or something!”

Billy raised his hand slowly and pointed at the lunatic dog. In response, Bouncer lived up to his name and gyrated even faster. Turning to look up at his father, Billy actually laughed out loud, exclaiming, “Dad! Can I get him? Puh - leeeze!”

Reaching down to hug his son, the father exclaimed, “Of course, Billy! He’s all yours!”

Alice clapped her hands with glee, beaming down at Bouncer, saying, “Oh what a good boy! You’re going to get a wonderful new home!”

Bouncer abruptly stopped his antics, looking over at Daisy. “What just happened?”

Daisy smiled and winked at her handsome admirer, responding, “C’est la vie, mon ami! Au revoir!”