

Unforgotten

By: Alex Stolle

As they stepped onto the train, Charlie fought every urge to jump on after them. He loved seeing the young pups and the humans rushing on and off the train all excited like, but he knew to wait his turn. He sat at attention beside the bench just outside the ticket office, waiting for his human to arrive. The young'uns were hopping on the train, their little nubs a wagging. They sure looked adorable. Charlie wanted to play with them, but that was against his training, so he waited.

“Hi!” a tiny voice said. Charlie tilted his head slightly to see a young collie standing there, her tail thumping excitedly. “Wow! You’re really big. Wanna play?” the young’un asked, bouncing up and down on her paws. She wore a pink collar with a leash, but no human in sight.

“You get to steppin’, small pup. I’m on duty,” Charlie lied. His tour of duty had ended the day before yesterday. Almost ten years on the job, and he should’ve known to avoid that there landmine. Now, he was short one leg and one career and his human was taking him to a new home. No more bombs to sniff, bullets to dodge, perps to track, or parades to attend. No more of them snooty purebreeds making snide remarks about his parents.

“What’s duty? Is it fun?” the pup asked. Charlie dropped open his mouth in a grin, his tongue lolling out. The pups were such fun at this age. He glanced in the direction his human had gone, then swiveled his head to see they were the only two on the platform. The train would leave soon.

“What’s your name, young’un?” Charlie asked. He bent his head down and sniffed the pup gently. The pup barked excitedly and spun in place, rising on her back paws and tickling Charlie’s nose with her claws.

“I’m Eleven, what’s your name?”

“The name’s Charles Chickens, but my human calls me Charlie,” he replied with a slow wag of his tail.

“You talk funny, Mr. Chickens. Why do you talk weird like that?”

“It ain’t weird where I’m from, young’un. The other dogs in my unit done tried to get me to talk all proper, like you, but it ain’t never stuck. Guess it’s on account of me not being bred for this work like they was,” Charlie said, his wag dying down as his thoughts drifted to his unit mates. He was the only one left now. He took it as a point of pride that he was the only one not pure like them, and he was the last to end his career.

“I don’t get it,” Eleven said, tilting her head to the side. Charlie could almost see her mental shrug as she brushed it aside and started wagging her little tail again. “Wow! You’re really big, Mr. Chickens. Will I be as big as you when I grow up?” she asked.

“Probably not. My size comes from my dad’s side. He was a Great Dane. Or as near to one as he could be. Ain’t neither of my parents exactly pure,” Charlie said. His mind drifted back to when he was a pup. He hadn’t grown into his paws back then. The other pups in his unit had left him eat’n their dust, and the big dogs’d made fun of him during training. No one had ever thought a mutt like him would become a service dog. “Then again, you never know,” Charlie continued. “The last time I was here, I went to College Station, a place the humans call Texas A&M, for a football game. I was a young’un then. My human took me there to learn me

how to handle crowds, but I remember seeing this real purty lady collie there. She had the same coloring as you, but she was a show dog. She didn't seem that big."

"That's where we're going! My nana and I are going to Texas A&M to see my mom. She's a show dog, too. All of my family are show dogs," Eleven said with a proud thrust of her chest.

"Is that right? I bet yer folks are mighty proud of you, little pup."

"What was that collie you met like?"

"She was really something," Charlie said. "I ain't never seen another dog like her. She was a beautiful, rough collie led by a human in uniform. When I saw her, my heart beat so fast I about died. Or as near to it as I ever had at the time. I can still smell her scent drifting o'er to me across the wind. I'd never pulled so hard on my leash a'fore in my life. I had to introduce myself, but my human wouldn't let me. I still think about her sometimes and wonder what might've been if'n I'd met her.

"Wow, what was her name?"

"The humans called her Ms. Rev."

"Maybe she's still there? Are you going back to see her?"

"Nah, young'un, I don't think she's there no more. Besides, that lady collie was a pure breed. She wouldn't want nothing to do with an old mutt dog like me. My human and I are on our way to something called the Stevenson Companion Animal Life-Care Center, where I'm a going to rest awhile. I think I've done earned my rest."

"Oh, okay," the little pup said, clearly confused. She tilted her head again and gave another shrug. "Do you want to play?" she asked. Charlie curled his lips up in a smile and bent his head down to lick the little pup on the top of her head.

"Aye, might as well. I ain't got no more duty to perform anyhow," Charlie said. The little pup barked excitedly and spun around.

"Eleven, where are you girl?" a human voice called out. Eleven barked, spinning around and dashing off. Charlie felt his smile fade as he watched her run. He looked down at his missing back leg and knew he'd never run like that again.

"There you are, special girl," her human said as Eleven rounded the corner. She stood there with her grandmother and another human dressed in a uniform.

"Thanks for this, Casey. I'd have taken him myself, but I don't have the resources to take care of him," the human in uniform said. Eleven's human nodded as she gestured with her paw, telling Eleven to heel. Eleven trotted toward her human and stood next to Nana Nine.

"Hi, Nana!" Eleven said, jumping up and licking Nana's face.

"Settle down, dear. You must behave," Nana said, maintaining her dignity but smiling at her.

"I behave all the time!" Eleven said, bouncing on her paws. "Nana, I just made a new friend."

"You will often meet new humans, little one."

"No, I made a dog friend. He's super big, and his head is ginormous! He says he's a mutt, whatever that is."

"A mutt is a dog of impure breeding. I haven't known many," Nana said, her eyes going distant. "Although, there was that one."

“What one?”

“Oh, it was years ago when I began touring as Reveille. I remember him because he was tugging so hard on his leash. He was a stunning male, full of energy and big with massive paws. I can still remember his scent drifting to me in the wind. I tugged on my leash for the first time since I completed my training. It came as quite a shock to me as well as my human. I did it without realizing it, but my human quickly brought me to heel. I would’ve loved to have smelled that wonderful mutt from a bit closer, but I was working.

“Did you ever meet him and make him a friend?” Eleven asked, and Nana chuckled, licking her head affectionately.

“Of course not, dear. I never saw him again, but I still think about him occasionally. He wouldn’t want anything to do with an old show dog like me these days, but I sometimes wish I could see him again.”

“Maybe my new friend knows him! Come on, I want you to meet him!” Eleven said, getting ready to dash off.

“Hold on, girl,” Casey said. Casey grabbed her leash to prevent her from running off, and Eleven growled at the leash. She bit the leather strap, yanking on it and trying to tear it apart.

“He’s over here waiting by that bench,” the other human said. He smelled weird but seemed nice. Maybe Eleven would make him a friend, too!

“Okay, thanks. All right, you two. Now we can go,” Casey said and started toward the train. Nana Nine rose gracefully to her paws and strolled proudly beside her human while Eleven scrambled after them. They rounded the corner where the old dog sat. Eleven was again struck by his size. He turned his massive head toward them and then suddenly woofed. He jumped to his paws, all three of them. Eleven tilted her head. Wasn’t he supposed to have four?

“It’s you,” Nana Nine said, stopping in her tracks with a stunned woof of her own.

“It’s who? That’s my new friend, Nana, Mr. Chickens,” Eleven said, wagging her tail. The big dog limped forward.

“Afternoon, Ms. Rev. It’s an honor to meet ya,” Mr. Chickens said, his voice rough. “I never had the chance before, but I had a crush on you when I was a young’un.”

“I remember you. Good heavens, I’ve never forgotten you,” Nana said. She was speaking fast and stumbling over her words. She let out a whine and shook herself all over. “What’s your name, sir?”

“Oh, there ain’t no need to waste them fancy manners on me, Ms. Rev. I’m just an old mutt dog who managed to work for a living until recently,” Mr. Chickens replied, gesturing at the stump of his back leg. “The name’s Charles Chickens, but everyone calls me Charlie,” he continued. Nana barked and tugged on her leash, dragging Casey behind her.

“Jeez, girl, slow down! What are you doing?” Casey asked. Nana ignored her, and Mr. Chickens rushed to meet her. They nuzzled each other’s necks, and Mr. Chickens licked Nana’s face. Eleven didn’t know what was going on, but she was excited to be a part of it!

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr. Charlie,” Nana said after a moment.

“Just Charlie, please,” Mr. Chickens whispered. His deep voice was enough to make Eleven shake herself all over, but Nana Nine only let out a soft whimper and pressed her head against Charlie’s.

“Please, call me Nine,” Nana whispered. Her voice sounded weird, too. Eleven suddenly felt too young to properly understand this situation, which struck her as incredibly unfair!

“Nana, this is my new friend!” Eleven said, rushing forward and jumping up, resting her paws on Nana’s neck.

“It looks like they like each other,” the human in the uniform said to Casey.

“Thank you for befriending my granddaughter,” Nana said. Charlie let out a rumbling chuff which sent everyone’s tails wagging.

“More like she befriended me, Ms. Rev,” Charlie said.

“Oh, you! I told you to call me Nine. Ms. Rev was my stage name.”

“Come on, everyone, we’ve got to make the train,” Casey said. The other human handed Charlie’s leash to her, but if Charlie minded he didn’t say. His eyes were glued to Nana, and Nana hadn’t looked away from him either. Casey gave the leashes a gentle tug, and the two old dogs stumbled forward, leaning on one another and walking calmly toward the train. Eleven trotted along behind them.