THE WILD ONES

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Presume not that I am the thing I was …
I have turned away my former self.

William Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part 2*



Prologue

Eyes closed, Scamp lay in his basket on the cold floor. The gloomy stockroom was clogged with the usual scents: the musk of cat and rabbit … rodents and parrot … damp sawdust and droppings … the murky water that dripped from the slanted roof. All smells that Scamp had lived with for such a long time.

Smells trapped here like the pets.

With a sigh, the young Jack Russell opened his eyes. His stomach rumbled. If only Pam would come back and make things better!

Pam was the manager of the Pet Care Centre, and Scamp loved her more than anything. He'd loved her from the start – that long-ago day when his owner had left him in a cardboard box. With her big smiles,

shaggy hair and treats in every pocket, Pam brought joy and brightness everywhere she went.

Scamp had always hoped that if a new owner didn't want him, perhaps Pam would become his special person and take him home. Feed him and walk him and keep him safe.

But that was before the world changed.

Before something made the Outside dangerous.

How long had it been now since Pam had left and locked the doors behind her? Since then, the Moon had shrunk to nothing and then grown full again, hanging like an enormous white cookie in the sky. Scamp watched it each night, hoping for crumbs to fall through the cracks in the high windows.

Pam will come back for us, Scamp told himself. *She'll look after us again.*

Won't she?



One

The pets left behind had a name for when the world changed.

The Night of the Great Growl.

Pam was working late in her office when it happened. Scamp sat in his basket beside her desk, watching her tap and click. The Centre only sold small pets, not dogs or cats. But sometimes Pam took in rescue animals like Scamp when the shelters were full.

The Great Growl began with no warning – as if the night had turned into a giant beast, bellowing pain and lightning.

Pam ran out to the Centre's shop floor as the pets squeaked and howled. Scamp chased after her as she

watched at the window, then hid in the aisles, then went back to the window. A terrible wind tornadoed all around as houses lost their heads. The sky filled with ash and the city went dark.

Scamp curled in a ball and flattened his ears, but nothing helped. The Great Growl groaned on and on.

And when it stopped, so did the world.

Pam stopped too. She went to her desk and sat very still for a long time. Like she was asleep, but with her eyes wet and open.

Scamp had to bark at her and paw her and push his nose against her legs for such a long time before she did anything at all. Finally, she crouched down and held him. She held him very, very tight.

"Everything will be all right," Pam told him, pushing her face into his fur.

Scamp wanted to believe her.

But the next morning, daylight never came. The sky stayed dark.

The streets that before the Great Growl had honked and rumbled with queuing cars were now silent and empty.

The days were silent and empty too. No one came to the Pet Care Centre any more. Not even the nice people who worked there.

For a week, Pam fed herself and the animals special tablets from the vet supplies cupboard. She crushed the pills to powder and put them in the pets' food. Scamp tried to spit his out, but Pam wouldn't let him.

"The air outside has turned bad. It could make us sick," she explained. "These pills will help us all keep well."

Scamp didn't really understand. But despite the tablets, he still loved Pam completely. All the pets did. And Pam loved them back. She fed them and cleaned up after them and tried to train them to care for each other. There was nothing else to fill her time.

It wasn't always easy. Chandelier the cat proved to be a particular problem – she liked small, furry animals, but only when they were in her stomach. It took some time – and several soggy gerbils – to show her that eating them was not OK.

Once Pam trusted the animals to get along, she left out pet food and trained them not to eat it all in one

go – even the hamsters! She put out water from the big barrels in the place she called Staff Room. And while she lay down in her office – which Scamp noticed she did more and more often – she even let them exercise by themselves around the Centre.

That hadn't gone so well at first. Some gerbils escaped through a broken window along with Hank the grumpy degu. But when they didn't come back, it helped persuade the others to stay inside. Pam quietly sealed up the gap in the pane and no more was said.

Even so, Scamp still dreamed of being able to run far and wide. There was a nice yard at the back of the Centre, but even that was off limits now. Pam let him play around in the shop and chomp on chew toys but, being a Jack Russell, Scamp sometimes felt so full of energy that he didn't know what to do with himself. He'd stand by the big sliding doors that wouldn't open any more and he'd whine. The daylight was getting stronger. The road was littered with bricks, but it didn't look so very different. Surely…?

"No," Pam would say in her sternest voice.

"It won't be safe out in the open for weeks. No one can go out. Not you, not me. No one."

Scamp had settled for chasing round the aisles with Patticake – a dachshund from a shelter who'd been treated for an injury before the Night of the Great Growl. But although his back leg had healed well, Patticake was a much older dog who preferred digging holes to running. Luckily, there'd been some building work in the stockroom. In one corner, the floor was broken open, and the sausage dog had been digging in the dirt there ever since.

At night, when the pets were snoozing, Pam would usually spend a little extra time with Scamp in the Staff Room. The lights in the store had stopped working, and the Moon was hidden by the dirty grey sky. Scamp was glad of Pam scratching his head as he lay on the floor in the darkness beside her. She spent most of her days in the Staff Room listening to something called a *radio*. Scamp didn't know why; all it seemed to do was crackle and hiss.

"I should've tried to get away like the others," Pam whispered once. "But I couldn't abandon you all,

could I? My poor darlings." She had hugged Scamp close. "Help will come for us. Everything will be all right."

It already is *all right*, Scamp had thought, *because I have you, Pam.*

I feel safe with you.

One night, as the moon gazed down through the blustery rain, Scamp was running back and forth by the store's doors when he caught movement across the street. A shifting shadow.

Help HAS *come!* he thought.

But whatever was looking in at them, it wasn't a person. It looked like some kind of animal.

A strange *Thing* that Scamp didn't recognize.

The Thing waited there in the rain, watching.

Scamp jumped up, his hackles rising, to bark his fiercest bark, ignoring Pam's attempts to shush him.

"What is it, boy?" Pam said. "I can't see a thing."

That's because I scared the Thing away, thought Scamp. Nothing was there now, and he felt pleased with himself. *I protected our home.*

The rainy street was empty again.

Until the next night, anyway.

Then *two* of the Things were standing across the street, staring into the store. They were bigger than Scamp. Sort of twisted and hunched over. The Things stood in the darkness like they belonged there. And they watched the place like they wanted it.

I hope they go away, Scamp thought.

He had kept hoping that every night since. But Scamp could often smell the Things outside.

As if there were more of them each night.

Gathering. Getting closer.