

## **Nama and the Mern**

*Patreon content, David Anaan Drake*

*Mecra 3006*

*Aramaan City*

Nama stared at the Wraith creature. It was bigger than he would have thought, as big as a tiger, and stone gray all over. Other than a number of scars that looked like old knife wounds, its skin was smooth. He had the odd urge to touch its head and rub its back like they were old friends, but he had a deep sense that this was a sentient creature, and it would not do to force any contact until it had given him boundaries. It sat on its haunches, front legs straight, and it was entirely still except for a long tail that waved back and forward as if anxious or angry. His instincts told him that this creature, despite the spiked end of its tail and sharp teeth, was very friendly, perhaps even more so than most Ar'Manaan.

He smiled at it and dropped to sit on the wood floor so he wasn't towering over it. "Hello, I'm Nama."

It rumbled deep in its throat, turning its head to look back out through the door. Out of sight, something made a screechy noise. A white figure ambled in through the door with flappy wings and bat-face. The new creature moved in close to its gray friend and stared at him, its face tipped entirely vertical like an owl.

He realised then that it was shy, and its gray friend had wanted to check him out before letting the white one in to meet him.

His laugh was loud and full of joy right down to his belly. "You two don't have to worry 'bout me. I don't hurt anything unless it's trying to kill me or my loved ones."

Hawk stood in the doorway, silent and almost psychically invisible as always. He cleared his throat. "Gray and Moonlight, this is Nama Ree. Nama, if you open your telepathic senses they can talk to you."

Nama blinked at his friend. "Really?"

Hawk lifted one side of his mouth and nodded.

Concentrating, he dropped his shielding, and hoped that they were in a shielded room or he was going to get a migraine. The rest of the building vibrated back at him, but with the duller bite of a half-shielded room.

Gray tipped his head on the side. "*Can Nama hear Gray?*"

He nodded. "I can hear you."

Moonlight skittered around its friend, awkwardly scraping sharp claws and horned wing edges on the wood floor as it moved towards him. Half-tripping and sliding on the wood, it did a loose orbit around him, sniffing at him as if his scent would reveal something important that its eyes couldn't discern. As it returned to his front, it came in close. One clawed paw slipped again and forced it forward. He caught it with broad hands on its shoulders to keep them from bashing heads.

He smiled. "You need a bit of practise on four feet, huh?"

*"Moonlight flies, first and always. Walking is last resort."*

He chuckled. There was a deep peace in him as if they were friends long forgotten. It was as if every cell in his body told him they were friends, allies, and would never be a threat unless he initiated hostilities.

"You know, you both look quite a lot like two of the pieces in my Strategy set."

The two Wraiths tipped their heads a little, as if confused.

He laughed again, letting go of his new flying friend. "I'll show you."

He carefully got to his feet again, and moved to the other corner of the room where his bags were sitting. He didn't normally bring his grandfather's Strategy set when he travelled to other cities, but Tiras had wanted a game. He was very glad that he'd bought his proper set and not the cheap plastic one he used when teaching kids.

The front pocket of his tramping pack unzipped easily and he brought out the old wooden box from inside. Moving back to the two wraith creatures, he sat back down on the wood and opened the box so they could see the pieces.

His grandfather's set was very unusual, the "white" side was made of vivid blue stone in Ar'Manaan figures of soldiers, towers, and people of rank. The "black" side was made of red ochre stone with wraith figurines, and the Lord and Lady General pieces were made of white marble. He lifted the wraith Lord out of the box, unfolding the wrapping and foam bits that he used to keep them from being chipped. He sat the little white winged wraith halfway between himself and the real life, white winged wraith. It was tiny in comparison to its living cousin, but nearly identical. The wraith pawn was next. He gently lifted it out of its wrapping and put it on the floor towards Gray. Except for the little figurine being red, it too was close in shape and detail to Gray.

Both of them sniffed at their figurines. The big gray one made a huffing noise.

Moonlight rumbled a sound that was equal parts confusion and caution. It lifted a clawed paw and gently touched the tip of one claw onto the head of the white figurine.

Nama grinned and started taking out each of the wraith pieces and putting them on the wood. "My mother told me that this set was made a thousand years ago and given to my ancestor. There's supposed to be another one out there somewhere that matches it." He settled the wraith

queen next to the wraith lord. They were a white winged wraith, and a white four-legged wraith like Gray. Both real wraiths moved in closer, making a little whiny squeak.

Gray looked at him. *"These are the two eldest of the Eastern Plains Clan, before the war." "First to die."* Moonlight whimpered.

Without thinking, Nama reached to stroke Moonlight's face, to comfort its obvious distress. It flinched and he stopped, with his hand still up.

It huffed and moved forward, pushing its forehead against the palm of his hand.

Everyone knew that the wraith creatures were killed at the start of the Reformation war, what they didn't know was that if these two were indicative of the true wraith nature, then it was murder, not defence.

Nama sighed, feeling uncomfortably emotional as he rubbed Moonlight's snout and forehead. "I'm sorry, kiddo. We Ar'Manaan can be horrible. If I could go back in time I'd do everything in my power to stop those murders from happening."

The two creatures moved forward, Gray expertly avoiding standing on the Strategy pieces as it moved in close, and Nama had two big bodies in close, with a head on each shoulder. Both of them rumbled in his ears and his instincts told him that this was a hug. He lifted both arms to wrap around them and closed his eyes.

"You've started a mern pile without me!" exclaimed Nalana's voice. She laughed and joined in the hug.

Nama opened his eyes and they grinned at each other.