

The Gathering Storm: Chapter 11

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From set *Ravnica Allegiance*

Nivix was never truly quiet. Even in the dead of the night, there was always some inventor who couldn't sleep scratching new designs at a drafting table, some chemister working around the clock to meet a funding deadline. But normally, the building at least slowed down after midnight, the hallways emptying out except for the scorchbringer guards and watchful automata. Even madmen needed rest, eventually.

But not tonight, or any of the nights in the week since the disaster at the guild summit. Huge banks of lights turned darkness into broad daylight, while mizzium generators in the bowels of the building hummed and sparked. Every desk was full, every laboratory, every testing chamber, the air full of the smell of ink and fumes and hot metal. When workers collapsed, they were dragged away to makeshift barracks in the halls, laid out on blankets and given a few hours rest before being revived with coffee and sent back to work.

And, perhaps uniquely in the history of the guild, all that effort was bent toward a single goal. Committees had ceased meeting. Bureaucratic in-fighting between the different laboratories had been put on hold. A thousand bickering geniuses had had their heads cracked together until they were all pointing in at least approximately the same direction. Word had come down from the top—from the *very* top—that every resource the Izzet possessed was at Ral Zarek's disposal, and anyone who got in his way would answer to the Firemind.

Ral hadn't left his office since his return from New Prahv. Meals were brought in, changes of clothes, fresh rolls of drafting paper, and the outputs of a hundred other offices for collation and combination. He had long since lost track of the time, or even the day. He worked until he could no longer force his eyes open, then put his head down on his desk and slept until he was woken by the next delivery or disaster.

While he slept, he dreamed.

Ral remembered being torn into pieces so small as to be invisible, flowing through a sea of strange energies and twisted space, and reassembled bit by agonizing bit.

He opened his eyes and found himself face-down on a sewer grate.

It had a strange brass design, not like the Tovrna's wrought iron, and the walls around him were sun-burnt brown brick instead of gray stone. Rain was falling, pounding up and down his back, and a stream of water ran past him and down into the sewers. Ral could see a streak of crimson in it, and felt a sharp pain in his side.

That's right. He put his hand to the wound, felt blood pulsing wetly against his palm. *That boy stabbed me. And I made it home . . . and Elias . . .*

Thunder rumbled overhead, and the sky flickered.

“Well,” said a voice with a strange accent. “You’re dressed pretty nice to be lying in a gutter.”

“Someone’s having a bad night,” a second voice said.

“Bad for him,” the first voice corrected. “Good for us.”

Ral sat up, with an effort. There were two men leaning against the walls of the alley, watching him with amused, unhurried expressions. Their clothes were strange, loose flowing shirts and trousers, but he recognized their manner at once. Thugs were thugs, no matter where you traveled.

And where have I traveled? Some magic had taken him, that was certain. He cleared his throat. “What district is this?”

“District?” the second man said. He was the shorter of the two. “You must be from *way* out of town.”

“Figured him for a merchant,” the taller man said. “From somewhere they dress like that without anyone laughing at them, I s’pose.”

Ral shuffled to his knees, his hair beaten flat against his skull by the pounding rain. He forced words out through gritted teeth.

“Where. Am. I?”

The taller man strolled forward. “Where you *are*, friend, is deep in the dungheap. Now, it’s been nice chatting with you, but you might have noticed it’s pissing down out here, and I for one would like to off somewhere warm and dry and full of drinks. So. Hand over what’s in your pockets, and then strip off those nice things, and we’ll leave you as healthy as when we found you.”

His hand went into his pocket and came out with a knife. His partner drew one as well, the steel blades shining as lightning crawled across the sky overhead.

Ral took a deep breath.

“No,” he said.

“That seems like a mistake to me,” the first man said. “So I’m going to give you one more chance to think things over—”

BOOM. Flash and thunder were simultaneous, the lightning bolt snaking down through the rooftops to earth itself in the flowing water of the alley. Ral felt heat washing over him, power running through him, like fire in his blood. His hair frizzed and stood on end, and when he smiled, sparks arced between his teeth. Above him, the rain started to bend in gentle arcs, leaving a dry circle where he stood.

Moments later, Ral left the alley, richer by two twisted, slightly melted knives, a couple of purses full of copper, and two pairs of still-smoking boots.

Something was always exploding.

Again, not an unusual state for Nivix. But the explosions were usually a little less frequent, and accompanied with a little more fanfare. Most of the goblins believed that the best time to do a field test was at the grand unveiling, so that if whatever you were building blew up, at least everyone was there to see it.

Now the blasts shook the vast structure, day and night. Hydromancers put out the fires, and workers descended on the stricken laboratory, hauling away the bodies and hammering the metal back into shape before it had even stopped smoking. Danger was irrelevant—not that it was ever *that* relevant—

and cost was no object. The work went on, as the lines sketched by Ral's frantic pencil took shape in arcs of mizzium and steel, and chemisters with soot-blackened faces hurried upstairs to report success or failure.

APPRENTICE NEEDED

Ral stared at the sign for a long while, and sighed. But the profits from a couple of knives and pairs of boots only went so far, and his stomach was rumbling. The tinkerer's workshop was two stories of crumbling brick, with a strange glass-and-steel contraption emerging from the roof. Lightning swirled inside a globe at the top, but only weakly, and a gear train descending from the machine moved only in fits and starts.

An old man, wearing a pair of goggles with one lens badly cracked, wrenched open the door when Ral knocked.

"YES?" he shouted, then worked his jaw and swiveled one finger in his ear. "What?"

"I'm here about the apprenticeship," Ral said.

"Aren't you a little old to be an apprentice?" the old man said, looking him up and down.

"I want to learn about machines," Ral said.

Machines were everywhere in this strange city, buzzing through the air and rolling along the streets. So many of them were powered by tame lightning that his power twinged in sympathy wherever he went. He'd been staring at them, fascinated, since he'd arrived.

"You and half the city," the old man said. "Can you pay the 'prentice fee?"

"No," Ral admitted. "But I can work."

"I can hire a boy to clean my scuttle and launder my drawers for a half-bit. What else can you do for me?"

Ral raised his hand and concentrated. Power crackled in his fingertips, then arced upward, to the big globe. The lightning inside blazed with light, its weak glow strengthening until it was as bright as the sun. The chain of gears running down into the workshop started to spin, turning faster and faster, smoke rising from their bearings. Behind the old man, a metal whine rose to a shriek, and then something broke with a tremendous crash.

The old man looked over his shoulder, then back at Ral. He smiled.

"You're hired," he said. "What do you want to learn?"

"Everything you have to teach me," Ral said, running one hand through his hair with a crackle.

"Helloooooooo?" Hekara said, in a stage whisper. She opened the door to Ral's office.

Ral looked at her, bleary-eyed. "What?"

"Just thought you could use a bit of, you know, cheering up." She spread her arms. "That's what mates are for, right? Keen!"

"I don't have time," Ral said. "None of us have time."

“Awww, there’s always time for a little fun, eh?” Hekara spun gayly across the room. Her trailing hand caught a jar of pencils on the corner of Ral’s desk, which tipped over, sending them rolling across the floor. “Oops.”

“*Hekara*,” Ral began, voice rising. Hekara flinched, looking so chagrined that he paused and let out a breath. “Just pick those up. And . . . sit in the corner and stay very quiet. Can you do that?”

“Ooh, like in hide and seek! I’m terrible at that. Not like my mate Brevia, she’s the best. We played down in the basement of the Flaming Whips, and it took me *three weeks* to find the spot where she’d hidden under the floorboards!” Hekara wrinkled her nose. “Of course she did whiff a bit by then.”

Ral leaned back in his chair with a sigh and closed his eyes.

Harith was unlike Elias in almost every way—tall and broad-shouldered instead of willow-slender, with a laborer’s muscles and rough, callused hands instead of a poet’s dexterous fingers. Perhaps, Ral thought, that was why he’d been drawn to him immediately, three drinks into a bad night in a cheap tavern. Or perhaps he was just the first person in a long time who seemed interested in talking to Ral instead of exploiting him.

The room was Harith’s, much bigger than the rat trap Ral rented with the pitiful stipend Ghazz, the old tinker, was willing to pay him. It was on the top floor of a red brick building, overlooking a neighboring alley, spiderwebbed with clotheslines and hanging laundry. Harith kept the windows open for the hot, dry breeze; it meant that anyone in the alley could probably hear what they’d been up to, but Ral found he didn’t much care.

Harith stood by the window, looking down, wearing only a sleeveless dressing gown. Ral rolled onto his side to admire him, the hard planes of his body, the tight thatch of orange-red curls that felt just right when he curled his fingers through them. Sensing his regard, Harith looked over his shoulder and gave a lopsided grin.

“Thought you were going to sleep until noon,” he said. “Hangover?”

“Surprisingly, no,” Ral said, flopping onto his back. His own hair hung lank and disheveled with sweat. “Just lazy.”

“What about old man Ghazz? He’s not going to be mad you’re late?”

There was a long pause. Ral stared at the ceiling for a moment, eyes tracing the spiderweb cracks in the plaster, trying to keep his racing heart under control.

“I didn’t tell you who I was working for,” he said, quietly.

Harith swore under his breath. When he turned away from the window, his smile was broad and as false as a tin zino.

“I must have heard it somewhere,” he said.

“And that’s why you talked to me,” Ral said, still not moving. “You need something.”

“It’s not like that—”

“Just admit it.” Ral let out a deep breath and sat up, running his hand through his hair. Lightning crackled, restoring its frizz. “What were you hoping to get from me?”

Harith looked at him, all cold calculation, no desire left in his eyes. “The combination to the vault. Ghazz has some toys that people I know would pay well for.”

“And I was supposed to hand it over for a tumble and a pretty smile.”

“Ral . . .”

“Thirty percent.”

Harith blinked. “What?”

“That’s my cut. Thirty percent.”

“Ten,” Harith snapped. “I’m the one taking all the risk.”

“Twenty-five,” Ral said. “Ghazz will know it was me, and I won’t be able to get another apprenticeship. Besides, you should have been honest with me from the beginning.”

Harith looked like he’d been sucking on a lemon, but he nodded. “Twenty-five.” He hesitated. “You’re not worried, about having to leave Ghazz?”

Ral forced his features into a carefully engineered smile. “I don’t have anything left to learn from him.”

The walk up to the Aerie seemed especially long when you had to make it in the middle of the night, in response to the Firemind’s peremptory summons. Ral rubbed his eyes, feeling deep bags under them from lack of sleep, and grit his teeth. In his wake, a dozen goblins carried long rolls of paper under their arms, hurrying to keep up with his purposeful stride.

When they reached the great doors that led to Niv-Mizzet’s sanctum, Ral gestured for his assistants to stop.

“I’ll call when I need you,” he muttered.

“W . . . what if the Firemind devours you?” one wide-eyed goblin woman stammered.

“Then I’ll scream,” Ral said, “and you can take the rest of the day off.”

He pushed the doors open. Niv-Mizzet sat on his haunches in front of the great window, among the arcane detritus and machinery of his Aerie, several books hovering in the air in front of him. They carefully bookmarked and stacked themselves on a table as the dragon’s long neck swung around to face Ral, fins flaring.

“Ral Zarek,” Niv said, his voice both clear in Ral’s mind and an ominous rumble in the dragon’s throat. “I have been waiting for your report.”

“My apologies, Guildmaster,” Ral said, bowing. “The situation has been . . . confused.”

“I dare say,” Niv said. “It is not every day the supreme judge of the Azorius is assassinated under our noses.” His head snaked closer, breath a hot wind on Ral’s face. “But I require answers, not excuses.”

“Of course,” Ral said. “Our representatives have visited every guild since the . . . incident at the summit, with some success. With Isperia’s death, Dovin Baan has assumed leadership of the Azorius, and I understand his position as supreme judge is only awaiting confirmation by the Senate. He has been most accommodating and remains convinced that cooperation is the best way to meet Bolas’s threat. Aurelia of the Boros Legion also sent her firm commitment to continuing the negotiations. Kaya of the Orzhov and Lazav of the Dimir have expressed similar sentiments.” Ral tried not to let his expression shift at this last. *I still don’t trust Lazav.* “And Hekara has communicated with Rakdos himself and assures me that the demon remains willing to assist us.”

“Six guilds,” Niv rumbled thoughtfully. “And the rest?”

Ral took a deep breath. “The Simic have retreated to their zonots and raised their defenses, refusing all communications. Emmara of the Selesnya says that with Trostani still . . . at odds, forces counseling caution have gained the upper hand. She offers neutrality, but nothing more.”

Niv’s huge eyes bored into him. Ral felt sweat beading on his forehead.

“The Gruul appear to have suffered some sort of leadership struggle in the aftermath of the summit,” he went on. “Borborygmus has fallen, and we do not yet know who has taken his place. But the clans seem agitated, and raids at the borders of the rubble belts have increased. Aurelia has promised to increase patrols and step up her defenses.”

“And Vraska?” Niv said softly.

“No one has seen Vraska since the night of the summit,” Ral said. “But reports from the undercity are that the Golgari Swarm is mobilizing for war.”

“We need all ten guilds to amend the Guildpact,” Niv said. “Including ourselves, then, we have six, with two neutral and two actively hostile to our cause.”

“Yes, Guildmaster,” Ral said, inclining his head.

“In other words,” Niv said, his voice rising to a dangerous rumble, “you have *failed*.”

There was a loose board, just beside the bed where Ral and Harith had spent so many nights that—Ral had to admit—had been at least diverting. Ral set down the bag that contained his few possessions and levered the plank out with a dagger. In the space between the top floor and the one below was a canvas sack, which clinked dully as Ral extracted it. It was half-full of the strange, rod-shaped silver tokens that passed for coins here, the wages of months of theft, sabotage, and occasional violence.

There was also the black notebook. Ral had watched Harith scribble in it, when he thought no one was looking. He’d finally stolen a glance a week before, after getting his lover blind drunk on fortified wine. The book had Harith’s lists of contacts, his potential targets, ways in and ways out. Secrets, and who might be most vulnerable to their use. A treasure trove for another time. Ral tucked the book under his arm, stowed the money in his bag, and replaced the floorboard.

He stole out of the building as quietly as possible. Harith was out on a job tonight, and Ral had pleaded illness. With any luck—

“You know,” Harith said, “I didn’t want to believe it.”

Ral paused, on the landing leading to the stairs. Harith was waiting one flight below. Two hulking thugs in street leathers backed him up, a big, heavily tattooed man with a cudgel and a lanky minotaur with enormous scarred fists.

“I thought we had a pretty good deal,” Harith said. “You had your twenty-five percent, didn’t you? You had protection, a place to sleep, someone to sleep with.” He stepped forward. “That wasn’t enough for you?”

“It’s time for me to move on,” Ral said, coming down the stairs. “And we both know you couldn’t let me do that. Not with what I’ve seen.”

“Why move on?” Harith fixed him with a gaze that was half furious, half despairing.

He actually cares, Ral realized. He forced another smile, and shrugged. *The fool*.

Harith scowled and jerked his head, and the two thugs came forward. Ral spread his hands, as though bidding them to wait. On his pack, the thing he’d spent the last month building, a jury-rigged mess

of wire and steel plates, whirred jerkily to life. Power crackled through him, the kind of energy he'd normally only get by standing in a thunderstorm. He grinned at Harith's hired muscle as he closed his hands into fists, and white sparks crawled out along his fingers.

"I have nothing left to learn here," he said.

"Not yet," Ral said.

He wasn't an expert on reading draconic expressions—who was?—but he was fairly sure Niv-Mizzet was surprised. The dragon's long tongue flicked out, and his lips pulled back to bare sword-sized teeth.

"Explain," Niv rumbled.

"Bring it in," Ral shouted toward the doors.

His goblin assistants scuttled in, nearly frozen in obvious terror of the dragon. Under Niv's impassive gaze, they deposited their rolled papers at Ral's feet, and he gestured for them to spread the things out on the floor. After a certain amount of confusion and argument—goblins were goblins, even under the eyes of the Firemind—they assembled the sheets in the proper order.

What took shape was a huge map of the Tenth District, detailed enough to show every alley. Drawn on top of the street plan was a complex network of colored lines, thick and interconnected in some areas, sparse in others. The basic shape of it was familiar, of course; the Implicit Maze, the contest Beleren had somehow managed to win and become the Living Guildpact, only to abandon that responsibility when Ravnica needed him. *This* map, though, was much more detailed, and assembling it had consumed much of Ral's attention for the past week.

"The power network," Niv said. He did not sound impressed.

"Indeed," Ral said. "Which is, as we learned, the underlying structure of the Guildpact itself. It is laid out in the city, all around us, nodes and lines linked to create the power that binds us all."

"All this is well known to me," Niv said. "I watched Azor lay the foundations."

Ral nodded. "Azor stipulated that all ten guilds be in agreement to change the Guildpact," he said. "But that rule is *part* of the Guildpact itself, which means it is embodied in these lines of power, just like all the rest. If we cannot meet the Guildpact's conditions, then we must simply evade them."

"*Evade* them?" Niv said. "You think *you* can tamper with Azor's work?"

"Only superficially," Ral said. He ran a hand through his hair, raising sparks, and walked across the vast map. "We can construct artificial lines of energy to alter the design. Most of the technology is already in place—power condensers, a resonating chamber, mizzium-coil batteries. It only needs to last for a moment. A machine that will span the Tenth District. The greatest creation the Izzet have ever attempted."

"And this . . . thing," Niv said. He sounded skeptical. "It will allow you to alter the Guildpact, enable my ascension, without the consent of all the guilds?"

"Yes," Ral said, with considerably more confidence than he felt. "There are just a few trifling difficulties to overcome."

"Such as?" the dragon rumbled.

Ral looked down at the map. "There are a limited number of effective configurations of nodes," he said. "The resonating stations must be very precisely placed across the district. Finding an arrangement that avoids the territory of Simic, Selesnya, Gruul, and Golgari has been . . . impractical."

"Hmm," Niv said, head snaking forward. "These red markings are your current plan?"

"Yes," Ral said. "Simic and Selesnya may come to their senses, but we cannot count on it. Not in time. This arrangement requires only nodes in Gruul and Golgari territory, here and here." He pointed.

"The Gruul and the Golgari will not simply allow us the use of these nodes," Niv said.

"They will not," Ral said, and straightened up. "So we will have to take them by force."

A conference room in Nivix, more commonly occupied by a half-dozen chemisters plotting some deadly mischief, had been hastily appropriated for a council of war.

Ral sat at the head of a long stone table, scarred and discolored by decades of experiments. On his right, the angel Aurelia stood with her arms folded, watching the others with blank, glowing eyes. Her second, the minotaur woman Commander Ferzhin, sat in a bulky chair and wore an expression of unabashed suspicion.

Opposite the Boros contingent were the Azorius representatives. The vedalken Planeswalker Dovin Baan, now that guild's leader, looked back at Aurelia with equal imperturbability. At his side was a young woman in silver armor he'd introduced as Hussar Captain Vell, who stood so painfully upright that Ral's back hurt in sympathy.

Finally, at the other end of the table, Kaya lounged in her chair, a broad smile on her face. A pinch-faced priest in black robes sat beside her, glaring as though he'd like to start scolding, but she didn't seem inclined to pay him any mind.

Ral glanced at the door one last time, sighed, and put his hands on the table. "We might as well get started."

"Our company is not complete," Aurelia said. "I assumed the rest of our allies would be joining us."

"Small loss," Ferzhin muttered.

"Lazav has already sent word that his agents will be available to help gather intelligence, but direct combat is not their specialty," Ral said. "As for the Rakdos . . ." *Where is Hekara, anyway?* Normally she was impossible to keep from getting underfoot. "I don't think they'll be missed at a planning session. We'll see them when the fighting starts, I imagine."

"And you're certain there is no other way?" Dovin said.

"Not in the time we have left to us," Ral said. "The Firemind has directed that all Izzet resources be committed to this project. We *will* have the resonators assembled and ready. For the nodes that we control, it's a simple matter of installing them and linking them to the master node here at Nivix. But we must have two more." He pushed a map of the Tenth District, annotated in pencil, across the table. "Here, and here. And it seems unlikely that we'll be able to take them peacefully."

"Certainly not this one," Ferzhin said, tapping the map with one clawed finger. "That part of the rubble-belt has changed hands a dozen times in the last two years as it is."

"And the other is in the Undercity," Dovin said, calmly. "Which means Vraska will be in an excellent position to try to stop us."

Ral nodded. "Fortunately, united, we should have the strength to seize both nodes. And with any luck, our enemies won't realize their importance." He looked around the table. "It should go without saying that the nature of our objective should not leave this room."

“The Gruul will fight, because that is their nature,” Aurelia said. “However, if we defeat them in the initial encounter, they are unlikely to counter-attack. Instead they will search for weaker targets to raid.”

“There are several garrisons within an easy march of this node,” Ferzhin said. “And we conduct operations against the Gruul regularly. We should be able to field a sizable force without raising any eyebrows.”

“Good,” Ral said. “I’d like to suggest that the Boros provide the bulk of our forces on the surface, then, with Izzet and Azorius providing a few elite units to assist. I will join you myself, of course.”

“That should be enough to send the savages scurrying,” Ferzhin said, grinning at the prospect.

“Do not underestimate the Gruul,” said Aurelia. “They are cannier than they appear.”

“We won’t,” Ral promised. “As for the Undercity operation, that’s where you come in.” He looked across the table at Kaya. “I was hoping we could rely on the Orzhov for support underground.”

“Hmm?” Kaya blinked, looking distracted. “Of course. Whatever you need.”

“Guildmaster,” the priest said, “perhaps a more limited commitment—”

“*Whatever* you need,” Kaya said firmly. “And I’ll be there.”

“Guildmaster, please,” the priest said. “Your safety is paramount.”

“I owe Ral for his help,” Kaya said. “And I pay my debts.”

“Good,” Ral said. “I’m going to ask Hekara for Rakdos help there, too. And Vraska is more likely to try something clever after we take the node, so we’ll need to fortify our position.”

“Our people can handle that,” Dovin said. “With help from our Boros friends, of course.” The minotaur bristled, but Aurelia only nodded.

“Okay.” Ral took a deep breath. “I know what happened to Iperia was a . . . shock. But we always knew Bolas had allies here, and now they’ve revealed themselves. All that’s left is to crush them.” He looked around the table. “Thank you for your commitment to Ravnica.”

“Of course,” Dovin said, after a moment of silence. “What other course could we take, after all?”

It’s done. Nivix was still a hive of activity, but none of it required Ral’s intervention. The great machine was under construction in dozens of labs and workshops, pieces being forged and welded that, when finally assembled, would create forces that would stitch the Tenth District together into a single vast work of magic. The work of Azor himself, tweaked and modified by the combined genius of hundreds of the Izzet’s best. Ral felt a fierce pride in his guild, his adopted home. *We’ll make it.* The thought of his bed was suddenly unbelievably appealing. Ral got up from his desk with a groan as his aching body complained, stretched, and stumbled toward the door. Plans for the attack on Gruul territory were well under way, with Aurelia handling the tactical details. Ral would be the first to admit he was no military expert, so he was happy to leave those matters to the angel and her subordinates. *So there’s no harm in my getting some sleep.* In the corridor outside his office, though, a thin figure sat cross-legged against the wall. Ral looked down at her and sighed.

“Hekara.” She didn’t move, and he prodded her with his boot. “Hekara.”

“I didn’ do nothing!” Hekara said, starting suddenly awake.

“No one said you did,” Ral said.

“Sorry.” She yawned and wiped her eyes. “I was waiting for you to finish.”

Ral held out a hand, and she took it and pulled herself up. Her skinny frame seemed to weigh almost nothing. She gave him a smile, as always, but there was a strain at the edges that felt off.

“You missed the strategy meeting,” Ral said.

“I’d just have died of boredom,” Hekara said. “His Stompiness says just tell us when you want our help. Against the Gruul, or . . .”

She trailed off, then fell silent.

“Hekara,” Ral said. “What’s wrong?”

“I just . . .” she began, then shook her head. “Ain’t there a way we can work things out with Vraska?”

“Vraska is working for Bolas,” Ral said. “She betrayed us all at the guild summit. She killed the supreme judge of the Azorius.”

“I *know*,” Hekara said miserably. “I know all that. But she’s our *mate*, Ral. We fought with her. You don’t go against your mates, not ever. That’s just . . . the way it is.”

“I understand.” Ral put a hand on her shoulder and lowered his voice. “I . . . thought I could trust her.”

A rare thing. The old Ral, the Ral of his dreams, had decided never to trust anyone. With the help of Tomik and a few others—even *Hekara, odd as that seems*—he’d thought that was beginning to change. But now . . .

“She hasn’t given us any choice,” Ral said. “Bolas is *coming*, and if we’re going to stop him, we need those nodes. If Vraska tries to stop us, that makes her the enemy of all of Ravnica.”

“Yeah. But . . .” Hekara shook her head. “Never mind.”

She turned, dejectedly, and walked away. Ral looked after her for a moment, then sighed again, and headed for the stairs.