

Innistrad: Family Game Night

Seanan McGuire

From set *March of the Machine*

My dearest brother—

How I wish you would visit me here in Engelturm! The grounds are lovely, and the angels who once lay claim to this place have left a surprising array of tools geared toward the destruction and dismantling of the dead. In their haste to unmake the workings of your kind, dearest brother, they became expert butchers of skaabs. I think you would benefit from touring their workshops. And of course, the grounds are properly unhallowed, after their long absence and the occupation of so many unsavory things. Really, you would find it most soothing. I certainly do.

I know it stings your pride that I have not chosen to settle in Havengul even after leaving my beloved Thraben behind. How it must ache, to have your best-beloved sister so close at hand and yet refusing to enter the gates of your sterile, industrial city! But fear not, darling brother, for I remain close enough for you to visit, if you did not put the needs of your “research” above those of your only surviving family.

If you had not already demanded I lay our parents to rest, they would surely be shambling over to scold you now, you unfortunate, uninspired mockery of a ghoulcaller. What you do is no more than a pale imitation of my art and will never rise beyond the level of simple science to that of towering inspiration.

Those white branches in the midnight sky were a lovely display, like latticed lightning. Was that your doing, brother? Perhaps you’ve found your true calling and can finally properly leave the dead to me.

I would wish you well, but you have long since walled yourself off from anything more than misery, and so I will only wish you endurance. May you survive long enough to see all that you have built fall to dust and rot to nothing, as your supposed “genius” must one day do.

Your adoring sister,

Gisa.

Gisa—

I am *not* regretting the choice to tell you my lab was too small for the both of us, thank you very much, and if you took that as me ordering you out of Havengul entirely, that is on your head, not mine. I never asked you to come here. I never asked you to move in with me. Go bother Jadar. I’m sure that old-fashioned churl is raising something horrible and dull that you could get involved with, if you asked him *very* nicely. I, on the other hand, am busy.

Corpses have been washing up in the estuary of late which defy all attempts at stitching. Ludevic has given me the great honor of researching this phenomenon, and I simply don’t have time for your antics. Go play with something dead, and leave me alone.

White lines in the night? No. Those are a natural phenomenon of some sort, and nothing of mine. If the cosmos wishes to rip itself to pieces, that is its own business, and so long as it remains outside my lab, I will leave it alone. I suggest you do the same.

Geralf.

Boredom and Gisa Cecani were not good companions. Oh, they had come together many times over the years, for an afternoon or a weekend getaway, but those encounters inevitably ended with the local population trying to literally *get away*, while Gisa cackled and called their dead relatives from the ground to make things more interesting.

Thraben had been boring after all the living people were gone and she was left with no one to keep her company but her beloved dead. Havengul wasn't that much better. Certainly, it had more than its fair share of the living, each of them ripe for the grave, but they were so preoccupied with petty pleasures and silly science that they were barely any fun. Even her own brother, dear, disgusting Geralf, was more interested in his research than in keeping her entertained! Why, she had agreed to a round of his rotten NecroWarfare, rules and all, and still he had stayed at his drafting desk, leaving her to make her own fun.

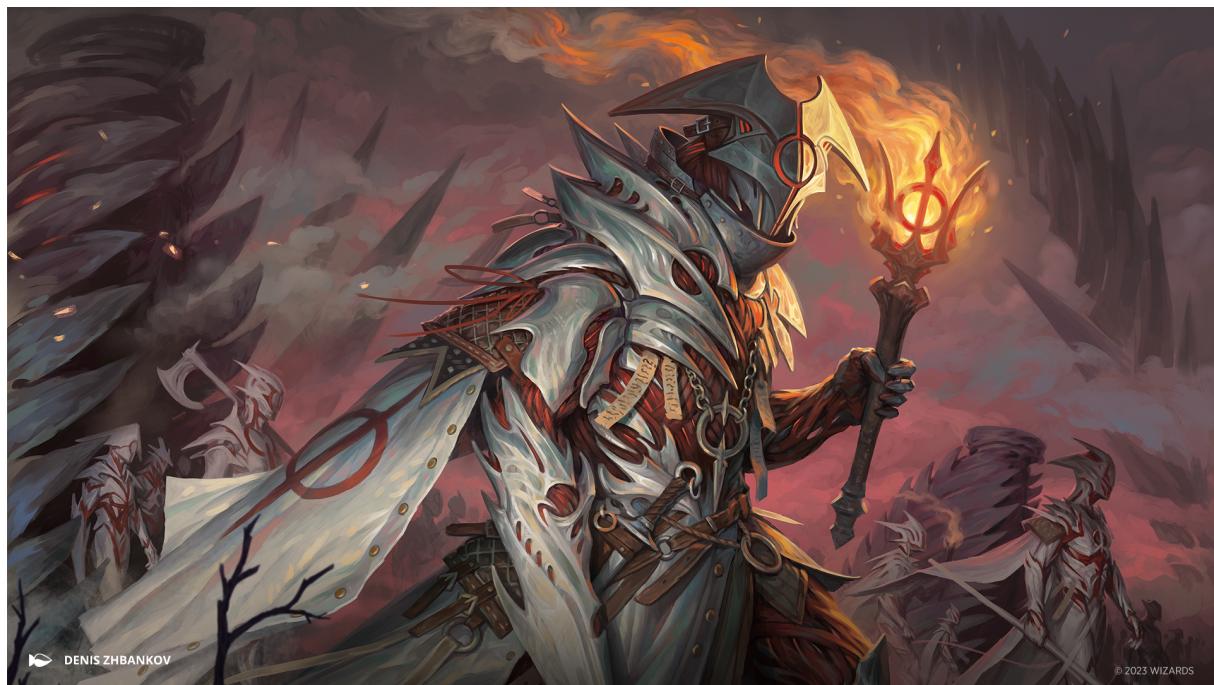
The Engelturm was fun. Watching her darling creations defile the works of angels was delightful, and it became amusing anew with each day's dawn, as the sun struggled to purify what she had dirtied during the night. None of the local vampires bothered her, out of fear of Jeleva, and Jeleva had been unwilling to come anywhere near her since a single chance encounter left the undead wizard with the distinct impression that devouring Gisa's mind would somehow damage her own.

As if anything could be other than improved by the influence of Gisa Cecani! She sat on the edge of a crumbling wall, letting an undead snake slither between her fingers, sloughing skin and scale with every motion, and waited for something to happen. Much like a carrion bird, she had found that if she waited long enough, something would *always* happen, and then *she* could happen to whatever it was.

Patience was often its own reward. A small group of bipedal figures shambled out of the Silburlind River, their skins glistening silver in the afternoon light. Gisa rose, dropping her snake, and moved to look closer. The silver wasn't an artifact of the river; it was the light shining off patches of hard, serrated metal, like these people belonged to her brother.

Gisa brightened. Perhaps her brother was taking her up on the offer of a game after all!

But the figures strode, rather than shambling, and as she watched, one of them drew a sword that gleamed with some sort of glistening, oil-like substance, slicing one of her sweet, innocent ghouls cleanly in two.



Art by: Denis Zhbankov

Gisa's mouth fell open in furious shock. Geralf was the one who insisted they play by stupid *rules*, not her! And his rules included both facing off at a predetermined place and time—a rule she'd been willing to overlook in exchange for the opportunity to play—and a prohibition against magical swords!

Swords that glistened with toxic rainbows and could cleave a ghoul that easily definitely counted as magical. Gisa scowled, whistling a long, low note. All around her, the dead she had risen for her own amusement turned toward the cluster on the shore. She whistled again and they began their advance.

The metallic people—who weren't skaabs after all, judging by the way they bled black oil, not viscous vitae, when her obedient creations ripped them limb from limb—fought brilliantly and hard, but in the end, they were outnumbered by a factor of dozens.

Gisa waited until they had stopped so much as twitching when prodded, then slid off her wall and walked slowly, deliberately toward the estuary. "You weren't invited to play with us," she told one of the more intact corpses, glaring at its open, empty eyes. "But now you can join the game, if you'd like."

She whistled, more sharply this time, and watched as the corpse pushed itself, swaying, from the ground to join her remaining hoard. "Very good," she said, and turned away.

The sound of something falling made her turn back and frown. The ghoul she had just called was sprawled in the mud, motionless. Gisa whistled, reaching for the almost palpable feeling of death that hung in the air around her, and found not a trace of her ghoulcalling's motivating force inside the corpse. It was no ghoul. It was just a body, just meat.

She called it again, and again it rose, and again it fell as soon as she allowed her attention to wander.

Eyes a little wide and heart beating a little fast, Gisa approached the corpse, prodding it with the toe of her boot. It didn't react. This had never happened to her before.

Whistling for her ghouls to follow her, she retreated into the walls of the Engelturm. It was time to call a messenger bird.

It was time to talk to her brother.

Dear meat-mangler—

Your most recent message was most unwelcome, and I begin to regret moving so close to you. Were you responsible for the ridiculous abominations which shambled from the estuary this afternoon to ruin my lovely day? Whatever you have done to these corpses is vile and inappropriate. They refuse to respond properly to good, honest ghoulcalling, but insist on collapsing into lifeless heaps as soon as I turn my back.

You have done something I would have thought impossible, brother dear. You have ruined the undead. Do not do this again.

(No) love,

Gisa.

PS: The sword was a nasty trick. You're the one who said no swords, and now you give your terrible mistakes of science swords covered in oil to attack my creatures with? Bad form, Geralf. Bad form.

Dear Gisa—

DO NOT LET THE OIL TOUCH YOU! I know you are clever, my sister, to have lived this long. The oil you saw is a contagion carried by the bodies that have come out of the estuary. An old associate of Ludevic came to visit recently. He was a very strange man, even by local standards, with white hair and a cold manner. The two of them fought, at length, before the man departed. Ludevic told me of these invaders shortly afterward, and said they are properly called "Phyrexians." (Unrelated, he has elected to trust me with the defense of Havengul while he visits a former student in Selhoff.)

These creatures are not my creation. They belong to Phyrexia, and they seek to destroy all that makes Innistrad itself. They wish to transform our glorious home into one more outpost along their long road to empire. Now that they have reached Havengul, we will need to find a way to hold them back, or all, even the dead, may yet be lost.

One point in our favor: it seems their oil first affects the living mind, and thus cannot infect the risen dead of Innistrad, whether ghoul or skaab. We can safely combat these Phyrexians, when so few others are. I admit I envy you the ability to sway them to your side even briefly; I cannot raise a corpse that has been tainted by their oil, however adroitly I stitch (and I am limited by the need to avoid my own infection).

Geralf.

Gisa looked between the letter and the estuary, which seethed and pulsed with the bulk of the bodies now emerging from it. These "Phyrexians" came in every shape and size, from humans to transformed werewolves and other such delightful horrors. They would make an excellent opponent.

Although their unpredictable numbers meant they couldn't be her opponent on her own. Quickly, she jotted down her response and tied it to the leg of Geralf's messenger thing, which he had sent back in place of her good, honest, undead crow.

Brother—

If anyone is going to destroy Innistrad, it's going to be us. I propose NecroWarfare, us united against Phyrexia, winner take all. If I win, I can have Havengul. If you win, which you won't, since you have finally admitted my superior power, I will grant you the Engelturm, while I return to Gavony.

Let's wreak some havoc.

Your sister,

Gisa.

Gisa—

It's on.

Geralf.

Geralf's first salvo in the fight was roughly what Gisa would have expected. A wave of terrible creations swarmed over the walls of Havengul to meet the Phyrexians between the river and the city. Many of them had three or more arms; some had three or more *heads*. They were horrors beyond comprehension, and they crashed into the growing wave of Phyrexians without hesitation.

Watching from the walls of the Engelturm, Gisa nodded. The Phyrexians were focusing their attentions on the city, by and large, leaving her alone. That would change once the battle began in earnest, she was sure, but for now, she could watch.

Her brother was creative, she had to admit that. Craggy-backed turtles soared above the Phyrexians on eagle's wings, only to drop from the sky and explode when they hit the ground, peppering the Phyrexians in shrapnel and slime that ate away at their oil-pitted flesh. Still, his hulks were quickly felled, and while he showed a remarkable amount of creativity—for him—in the amalgamations he threw at the opposing army, he was still too wedded to the idea of the human form. His imagination was his limit, and Geralf had always been deeply limited.

Gisa sighed. Time for her to get involved. Well, it wouldn't be a game if she didn't get to play. The air was so thick with residual deaths of thousands across Innistrad that she could taste it on the back of her tongue every time she breathed in, lighting up her mind like a firework exploding in the sky, and so she breathed in deep, pulling as much of that death into herself as she could hold, until she felt like she was on the verge of bursting.

Then she whistled. It was a long, low note, and the few living things close enough to hear it shivered, feeling as if their bones wanted to rip themselves free and join the endless harvest of the dead. Their skeletons twitched and then settled, uncomelled, and deep in the estuary mire, well away from the city walls, something stirred.

Gisa stopped whistling and cackled in manic glee as the undead moondrake she had called from the muck rose, majestic, into the sky. Its wings were laced with holes, but enough of the leathery membrane remained to let it catch and climb the air, pulling itself ever higher.

More ordinary ghouls pulled themselves from the muck and shambled toward the Phyrexian forces, moaning and wailing her challenge. The moondrake soared above them, and as it flew, it roared.

Let's see Geralf top *that*.



Art by: Alexey Kruglov

Gisa sat smugly back to watch the carnage, only to straighten again as another moondrake rose from the Phyrexian mass, this one peppered with tubing and dripping with more of that damnable oil. After Geralf's warning, she had kept herself well clear of the stuff. As he had promised, it didn't bother her deceased darlings, but it still got everywhere and obscured the finer details of the fight. Perhaps more importantly, creatures that showed traces of it no longer cared about self-preservation, being as willing to die for Phyrexia as her ghouls were to die a second time, for her.

Maybe that was why she couldn't keep hold of Phyrexian toys. Maybe they were their own form of undead, and like the nasty fluids Geralf and his fellow Stitchers used to reanimate their skaabs, the oil meant that she couldn't bring them back a second time. Whatever they were, it was better than skaabs. A broken skaab was broken for good, and no amount of calling and cajoling would get it to rise again. At least a broken Phyrexian could be of use, even if it took more work than it was worth.

The moondrakes slammed into each other as the lines of Phyrexians and ghouls collided. *Their* moondrake had jagged metal teeth and used them to lay open the belly of her creation, dumping its rotten insides out on the fighters below in a wet, sloppy tangle. The sudden loss of mass granted Gisa's moondrake a lift, allowing it to rise several feet above its opponent and lash down from above, jaws clamping onto the neck of the other drake just below the head.

The Phyrexian moondrake tried to shake it off, but the superior height of Gisa's moondrake left it with the advantage, and soon enough, both crashed to the ground, where her drake ripped the other's head clean off before wading into the fray on its own four legs, tail lashing. Its wings were shredded beyond repair, but she had forced the Phyrexia forces to expend part of their own air defense; the fact that they hadn't used the moondrake against Geralf's flying turtles probably meant that they'd been planning something around it, and now she'd spoiled that.

Smug, Gisa, directed her ghouls deeper into their forces, viewing each one she lost as a reasonable cost for the limbs they were wrenching from their opponents. Headless Phyrexians tended to stay down, she noted, unless they had moved their minds to other parts of their body; some of them had faces imbedded in their chests, implying a much more streamlined arrangement of organs. Those, she whis-

tled her ghouls to aim for where she assumed the controlling nerves would be, aiming to incapacitate as much as kill.

The Phyrexians seemed to have as little concern for their fallen as her ghouls; bodies, once they went down, tended to stay that way. That was good. They did, occasionally, try to drag the more intact corpses away so they could construct new Phyrexians from the remains, like they aspired to take her brother's place. That was bad, and naughty, and not to be allowed.

And even as all this was going on, still more Phyrexians rose from the estuary. As she scowled at them, one of the risen seakites she was using as sentries around the Engleturm cawed a loud and furious warning, and she turned to look that way.

More Phyrexians were approaching overland, and these ones seemed less likely to ignore her stronghold than the ones between the estuary and the city. This second force's current path would take them directly past the Engleturm.

"I said three-way, not four-way," she said furiously, standing. "Bad Phyrexians! Cheaters!"

And onward marched the invading army.

Inside the walls of Havengul, Geralf stitched as he had never stitched before, slamming bodies onto tables, moving between them with a speed that spoke of assembly rather than artistry. His gloved hands were shaking as he turned over a particularly battered body, searching for the telltale signs of the Phyrexian oil. Here, privately, where she would never know, he could admit that Gisa's art was superior to his in this single, solitary regard: she didn't have to get her hands dirty if she didn't want to. And oh, she frequently wanted to, but this game didn't risk her life as it risked his own. His skaabs were under strict instructions to avoid contaminated corpses, but there was only so much a rotting brain could do to verify the condition of the things they were bringing him. Most of the work was still his own.

At least there were plenty of corpses to be found. Even when a Phyrexian soldier killed someone, the body wasn't *always* contaminated, and his skaabs were bringing him raw materials almost faster than he could sew. The corpse cobbling was the longest part of the process, since he couldn't trust the seams to anyone else, and all his living assistants were unavailable, at this point.

Once the bodies were properly assembled, he could attach the binding plates to the key elements of his creation, keeping the body's individual donors from ripping themselves apart when called back to life, and begin forcing the viscera through the piping he had previously installed to drain the blood and ichor from the existing veins.

While that was happening, he was already moving down to the next body or bodies in the line, either reaching for the needle or beginning to chant the vox quietus that would awaken the creature. He didn't have time for the normal instruction and education that would follow; instead, as soon as his reborn skaab rose, still puzzled and innocent of the world around it, it would be armed, equipped with the basic information on what a Phyrexian was and how to destroy it, and sent out to defend the city.

What was left of it. The Phyrexians must have broken through the gates by now, and the screams from outside the laboratory were becoming less frequent, making him suspect that the population of Havengul was dropping while he worked. As long as the lab remained secure, his work would continue, and thanks to Ludevic's genius, they had so many secret tunnels and exits to push skaabs through that the Phyrexians would never figure out where he was.

Or so he hoped.

He was moving on to another table when the doors to the largest of those hidden tunnels swung open and a group of the skaabs he'd set to gathering raw materials entered, half-carrying and half-dragging a massive beast. Geralf blinked.

"Put it on the *big* slab," he said.

Gisa was directing another group of ghouls to rip the Phyrexians away from the Engleturm walls when a bellowing roar rose from the direction of the city. She turned. So did the Phyrexians. Her ghouls, being far more difficult to distract, kept attacking, making a solid inroad on the enemy.

A towering beast stepped over the Havengul wall, its antlers jutting upward from its thick caprine skull like spreading hands filled with moss and leathery flaps of skin, its long, sturdy legs augmented with pistons and what looked like an entire dead bear.

No wings this time, but still, it was reasonably impressive, for one of her brother's efforts. Gisa laughed and clapped her hands as the colossal behemoth began trampling Phyrexians. Where had Geralf's skaabs even managed to *find* the thing? It looked like one of the creatures that were sometimes found in the forests where Gavony bordered on the Kessig forest. She had never seen one this close to the sea.

He must be running low on raw materials if he was sending his scavenging parties *that* far from the city. Well. She couldn't allow a worthless flesh-fixer to have the biggest toy on the battlefield. Digging her heels into the stone beneath her feet, Gisa reached deep into the energy of a wounded Innistrad, pulling death into her until her veins sang and her blood was fire, until she could feel every dead and dying thing for miles in every direction. Thus, armed against the world of the living, she began to call.

Not a whistle this time: a full-throated song, wailing her demands to the space beyond the grave. She reached and reached, looking for the largest target she could find, and her questing power brushed against something terrible, vast and chitinous, buried in the mud at the very bottom of the Silburlind estuary. It had been there for a while, washed up by powerful currents, but it was fresh enough to respond when she sang, stirring below the water.

Roaring fury and snapping all nine sets of terrible claws, Gisa's terrible new plaything rose from the bottom of the estuary and began lumbering toward the land on row after row of sharp, serrated legs. It combined the claws of a great crab, the tentacles of a kraken, and the chitinous body of a lobster in a horrible configuration never meant to be seen above the waves. The Phyrexians not already engaged with Geralf's great beast turned toward this new threat, recognizing it as a possible end to the battle if not put down. The survivors who had been trying to breech the Engleturm pulled away from the still-aggressive ghouls and moved to join the rest of their company, forming a greater force between the creature and Havengul.

Panting and weary from the effort, Gisa sank back to her seat, laughing as she watched the Phyrexian army crash against her armored colossus. They stabbed and cut and tore, swinging those gleaming swords and striking with claws or scorpion tails that dripped oil from their tips, and her new favorite toy snapped them in two, claws scything like scissors through Phyrexian torsos. It didn't have the precision to aim for the neck every time, but her ghouls were there, going cleanup, decapitating, and dismantling as the creature ambled by.

The forces at the city wall were hacking away at the legs of Geralf's behemoth, and with a final, earth-shaking bellow, it fell, crashing to the ground and crushing several Phyrexians in the process. Their fellows tried in vain to free them, then moved to join the assault against Gisa's creature.

The terrible sea-beast continued snapping them in two, but its legs, armored as they were, remained its weakest point. They were thin and insufficient for locomotion on land, restricting its speed and opening its joints to attack. The Phyrexians began hacking away at its legs.

Gisa stopped laughing.

She glared at the Phyrexians chopped the legs out from under her creature. Like the behemoth before it, it fell, and its size was such that the top of its head took out a portion of the city walls. Gisa, although exhausted, whistled up another swarm of more ordinary ghouls, setting them to defending her own stronghold.

Maybe Geralf's silly rule about never attacking anyone in their headquarters wasn't so silly after all.

Gisa—

Beloved sister. This terrible new opponent moves too quickly for our resources unless we bring them together. While my science destroys corpses for your use even as Phyrexia destroys them for mine, we both know well that I can make use of bodies you have already cast aside, but only if you rescind your claim on them.

My skaabs are ready to retrieve both our greatest accomplishments from the city walls, and I believe they can do so without taking unacceptable losses, if we both focus our troops on the Phyrexians in that area. Only release your giant lobster into my care, and we can turn the tide of battle in our favor.

Geralf.

Gisa, who had been sulking over the loss of her beast, decided to rage instead. She raged Geralf's letter right over the edge of the wall, down into the battle below. She raged the skaab he had used to deliver it into several pieces, and when that wasn't enough, she raged a series of rocks after the letter, throwing them as hard as she could.

Sadly, and unlike when they had been children, her tantrum accomplished nothing beyond rubbing her throat raw, breaking a perfectly good messenger, and attracting the attention of several Phyrexians. She whistled a group of nearby ghouls into attacking them before they could begin to climb the walls, then grabbed for her letter kit, which she had kept at hand to make a gracious response to Geralf's inevitable surrender.

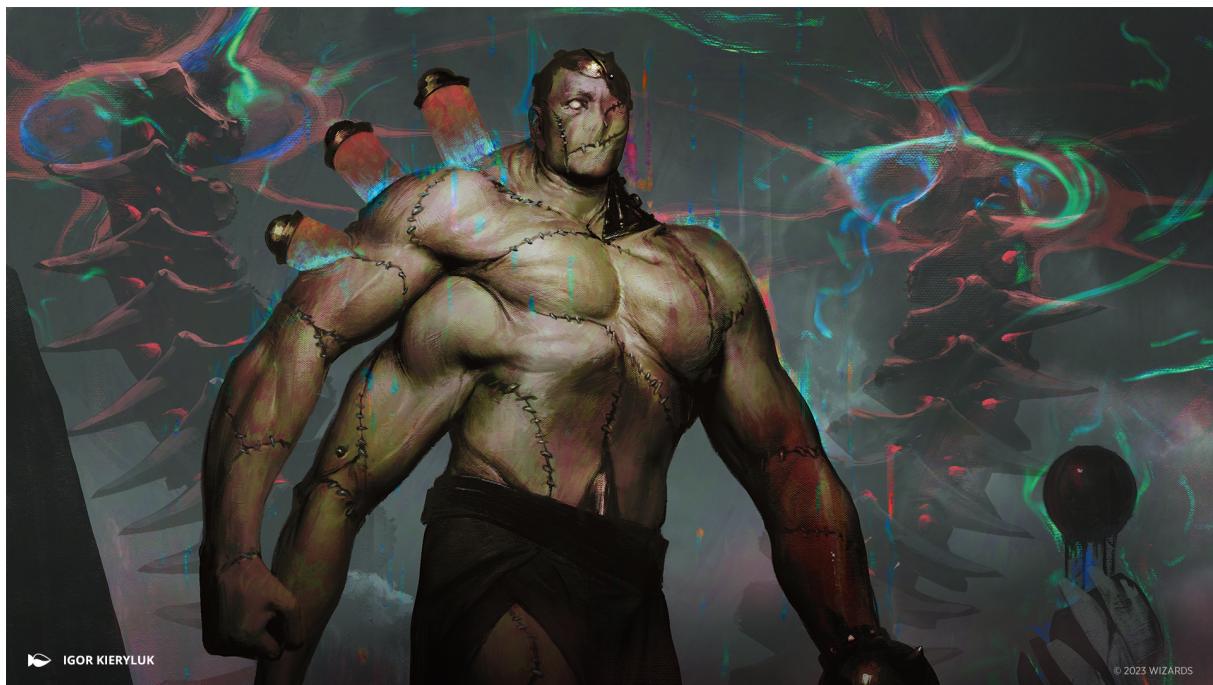
Better to let him repair a broken toy than to run out of corpses with no way to escape the Phyrexian forces. Whatever they were, it was something she had no interest in becoming. When *she* died, she was going to rise from the grave the *right* way, as a Cecani always did.

Dear beloved, gristle-gargling abomination of a brother—

My lobster is very broken. I suppose you can't make it any worse. If your creations can drag it back to your lab, I'll let it go. But you'll owe me!

Gisa.

Geralf didn't bother to reply before setting his skaabs to recovering the bodies of both monsters. They dragged them over the wall, crushing several houses, and along the streets to a square generally used for marketplaces and civic gatherings.



Art by: Igor Kieryluk

The trouble with this plan was that the lab would never contain both creatures. It had been a struggle to get the behemoth alone in and then out again. For him to perform this most epic act of science, he would need to expose himself to the possibility of attack.

Several of his larger creations had already toted the equipment he would need out of the lab, while a group of hunters cleared out the nearby Phyrexians—which included, he had been sorry to note, a few locals he’d been keeping an eye on for eventual acquisition, once Ludevic approved winnowing the populace. Well, they were ruined now, along with so many others. But none of that would matter once his creation rose.

Once he accomplished this, he would officially be recognized as the greatest stitcher who had ever lived. Grabbing the drill he would need to create seams through the beast’s chitinous armor, he grinned to himself and set to work.

This would be his masterpiece, his greatest and most terrible creation, and when it rose, all of Innistrad would know his name.

Gisa whistled frantically, grabbing control of fallen Phyrexians and using them to beat their former allies to death before letting them go and searching for more honest corpses. They were almost out. The seemingly inexhaustible dead of Nephilia were close to being, well, exhausted. Soon enough, her army would be broken, and while Geralf’s creations were doing their best to hold the line, her worthless brother had stopped adding anything to the fight as soon as she’d released her broken beast. Wrapped up in his own little experiment again, no doubt, and too preoccupied to care about Gisa’s needs, Gisa’s problems, the fact that *Gisa* was about to be overrun by Phyrexians—

A familiar, earth-shaking bellow rose from behind the Havengul walls, underscored with a deep gurgling sound, like it was rising through thick mud. Gisa took her eyes from the fight long enough to turn and see the unspeakable fusion of behemoth and aquatic nightmare as it rose from the city, claws clacking and antlers poised to gore.

Its new legs were longer, and it stepped easily over the walls as it charged into the Phyrexian mass, razored claws slicing Phyrexians in two, leaving their bodies to scatter the ground. Its hooves promptly pummeled them into mush, rendering them too broken to get up again even before Gisa whistled her ghouls back into the fray to relieve them of having heads.

The Phyrexians at her walls hurried to try and turn the tide, too late. Gisa whistled and Geralf laughed, watching the last of the attacking forces as they fell, screaming, before the tide of the dead.

The bonfire had been Gisa's idea, of course. Skaabs were notoriously flammable, while her ghouls only burned as fast as living people would. Still, they had to do *something* about the dead Phyrexians, since they were useless for all decent necromantic purposes. The siblings sat on the Havengul city wall, watching their creations feed the fire, enjoying the momentary peace.

And then Geralf had to go and ruin it.

"I'll miss you, sister."

"Miss me? Why would you *miss* me?"

Geralf shrugged, eyes on the fire. "Why, because you're returning to Gavony, of course. The terms of our agreement, as you may recall. If I won, you would give me the Engleturm, and go."

"You couldn't have won if I hadn't given you my toy! This doesn't count as a victory. I'm not going anywhere."

"Your toy, which was so vital that it collapsed as soon as the fight was done? Please."

Even with new legs, the great beast had been unequipped to exist outside the water, and had collapsed shortly after the battle, broken beyond even Geralf's ability to repair.

"Neither of us won," Gisa snapped.

The two continued to bicker as the survivors of Havengul huddled in their homes, armies of the undead squaring up in the wide plain outside the estuary, ready to resume their eternal fight.

Some things are beyond even Phyrexia's ability to change.