

Eldraine: The Adventures of Rankle, Master of Love

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Rankle swaggered into the clearing, his pockets stuffed with stones and magic dust. He was ready for a fight, but his friends were weaponless and in good spirits. Gleefully, they showed him a throne they had constructed out of mossy rocks and red-gold leaves. Orla threw rose petals in his direction, and Fifer wore a dead rabbit on his head—a fine new hat fit for a coronation. Rankle whooped with delight. Days of torment had paid off! They were about to make him their king. Only Mags stood to one side, chewing her lip with her sharpened teeth and scuffing her bare foot through the fallen leaves.

“Lord Rankle, approach the throne!” Fifer proclaimed in as formal voice as he could muster.

Orla began the recitation: “With much ado, we bestow upon you the circumstance of lordliness and sequential regal heralding “

“Where’s my crown?” Rankle barked with authority.

Everyone looked at Mags, who looked even more cross.

“Do your part, Mags!” Fifer yelled.

Rankle gave Mags his best regal smile. He liked her the best. She was clever with a knife and had sleek black wings, like a bat. Sometimes they ambushed caravans together, and once, they’d made the Questing Beast cry.

Mags scowled. She reached into her cloak and produced a tiara made from acorns and glass shards. Rankle’s heart beat a little faster. Mags had been the most resistant to his leadership demands. But maybe she loved him after all. She must, or they’d still be stabbing each other over who got to be the king.

Mags fluttered across the glade and jammed the tiara onto his head.

“Ouch,” said Rankle.

She gave him a snarling smile and a little curtsy, which made his heart soar. Rankle reached his throne and settled down on the crunchy leaves. He gazed out at his subjects and wished there were more of them. But he had to start somewhere, and three was better than none.

“As your ruler “ he began, but then Mags whipped out her knife and cut a rope hidden in the trees.

The rope was attached to a net hidden below the leaves. Instantly, it trapped him and yanked him up. He hung in a lump in front of the others, who were howling with laughter.

“Did you see his face?” Fifer chortled.

"I can't believe he fell for that," Orla said. "You were right, Mags."

"This was Mag's idea?" Rankle cried from inside the net.

"No, I just wanted to gut you," Mags clarified. "Fifer had to make it fancy."

Rankle couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Why?"

"Nobody wants you here," Mags said.

"You're too mean, you are," Fifer said, adjusting the dead rabbit on his head.

"You put bees in my mouth when I was sleeping," Orla said.

"That's mean?" Rankle protested. "Mags uses eyeballs in her slingshot."

"Not *my* eyes," Orla pointed out.

"You sewed my mouth shut," Fifer reminded him.

"You're fine now," Rankle protested. "Look at you, won't shut up."

"We don't want you here," Mags repeated. "Will you go or not?"

"No," Rankle said stubbornly. He turned his head away so she couldn't see his lip quiver. "This is my glade. I just let you stay here because I'm nice."

The three faeries huddled together, whispering. Rankle wriggled and tried to hear what they were saying.

"We'll let you down if you promise to leave and never come back," Orla said.

"Fine," Rankle lied. He was too scrunched in the net to do much else.

But as soon Mags released the net, he flew up and headbutted her with his glass and acorn tiara. Mags reeled back, but the other two jumped him. They tumbled across the clearing in a low-down, dust-kicking brawl. Rankle bit Orla's leg before they pinned him down, and Mags jabbed a sharpened stick into his wing to pin him down.

"Don't struggle, or it will tear your wing," she warned.

"Don't tell me what to do!" Rankle howled, struggling violently and swinging wildly. Mags held the stick in place while Orla and Fifer did their best to keep him down. Finally, out of breath, Rankle stopped struggling.

"Look what you've done," Mags said, yanking the stick out. Rankle's wing was in tatters.

"Ow," Rankle said, trying to flap, but his wing hurt even more.

Orla and Fifer stepped back, looking vaguely sorry. Usually, when someone got hurt, it wasn't permanent. Maybe that changed how they felt.

"Can I stay?" Rankle asked, craning his head around to inspect the damage.

"No!" all three of them yelled.

"We don't like you," Fifer shouted.

"No one does," Mags said, yanking the tiara off his head.

Rankle tried to fly up and away but couldn't with his now useless wing. He stomped out of the glade.

Rankle was in such a bad mood that songbirds gave him the stink eye. Even the butterflies avoided him as he trudged down the road under a strange, purplish sky.

“I’ll squish the lot of you,” he shouted at a fleeing swallowtail.

Rankle reached the cart road that traversed the boundary lands, the territory between the wilds and the Realm that both humans and fae folk frequented. Rankle hadn’t spent much time with humans, but he considered himself an expert: if you wanted friends, you needed coin. He vowed to rob the first human that he saw. Now that he had a plan, his spirits brightened.

The village’s clock tower was in sight when he found his mark. A white-haired man with a tidy beard and a blue cloak stood on Hero’s Rock at the crossroads outside the village. As Rankle crested the hill, he saw a group of villagers gathered around as the white-haired man gestured to the sickly sky.

“The sky is like a bruise,” the man bellowed. “Can you not see the signs?”

“You’re a fool, Chulane,” a villager shouted. “Go back to your storybooks.”

Chulane held up a yellow leaf. There seemed to be a symbol burned into it, but Rankle was more interested in the leather pouch on Chulane’s belt.

“Oh woe is me, I see the sign of autumn,” another villager mocked.

“Open your eyes!” Chulane begged them. “Something terrible is about to befall us!”

The elders headed back toward the village, but a youth picked up a rock and hurled it at the old storyteller. Soon several youths were lobbing stones, and Chulane jumped down and hurried away from the village. Rankle loved a good bout of rock-throwing as much as anyone, but since the youth were unlikely to have any coin, he followed the distraught man.

Rankle shadowed Chulane, keeping to the far side of the stone walls along the road. He kept looking for a proper place to ambush him, but the man’s long legs outpaced him easily, and Rankle’s tattered wing kept him firmly on the ground. Chulane kept raving about “warning the queen” and “Locthrawn,” with the coin clinking loudly as he practically ran down the rutted road.

Before long, they reached a perilous section of road known as Undertaker’s Corner, which looked out over an idyllic grange hundreds of feet below. Carts had been known to fly off the cliff instead of successfully making the sharp right turn to follow switchbacks down into the valley.

When Chulane paused to take in the view, Rankle clambered higher up the hillside ready to make his move. But he caught sight of Locthrawn Castle in the valley below, and all thoughts of ambush were forgotten. Although Rankle had heard tales of it since he was a bairn, this was his first glimpse of the floating castle, which reminded him of a majestic ship atop an ocean of clouds. Its graceful spires and massive battlements gleamed despite the dimness of the day.

Rankle could see a royal procession snaking up the switchbacks toward them. Knights in black and gold armor escorted Queen Ayara’s carriage up the treacherous road. Queen Ayara reigned over the Locthrawn Court and had a reputation for being fierce and cunning, just like Rankle himself. She had survived countless husbands and was looking for suitors who matched her regal bearing and intelligence. Rankle watched until the carriage, draped in the purple heraldry of Locthrawn, crested the hill. Even though he’d never seen her, Rankle had long admired the queen, and he snuck closer to Chulane for a better look.

"Ah, the queen approaches," Chulane said. Then suddenly, taking notice of the small figure next to him, he started and clutched the pouch at his belt. "Ah! Faerie! Don't touch my gold."

Rankle sighed. His curiosity had ruined the element of surprise, but he still had a pocket of magic dust and plenty of time to make mischief after the spectacle had passed. Rankle stepped off the road to make room for the queen's carriage, but Chulane jumped in front of it. Immediately, two knights flanked the old man and pointed their swords at his eyes.

"Please, let me speak to our most glorious queen," Chulane begged, bowing so low that his beard almost touched the road. "Just a word. I have been most persistent!"

Rankle ducked under the carriage before anyone noticed him. Above him, he heard the carriage door open. There was a rustle of skirts as the queen stepped onto the road. She stood in front of the genuflecting Chulane.

Peering through the wheel's spokes, Rankle saw the queen's gloved hand lightly touch Chulane's shoulder.

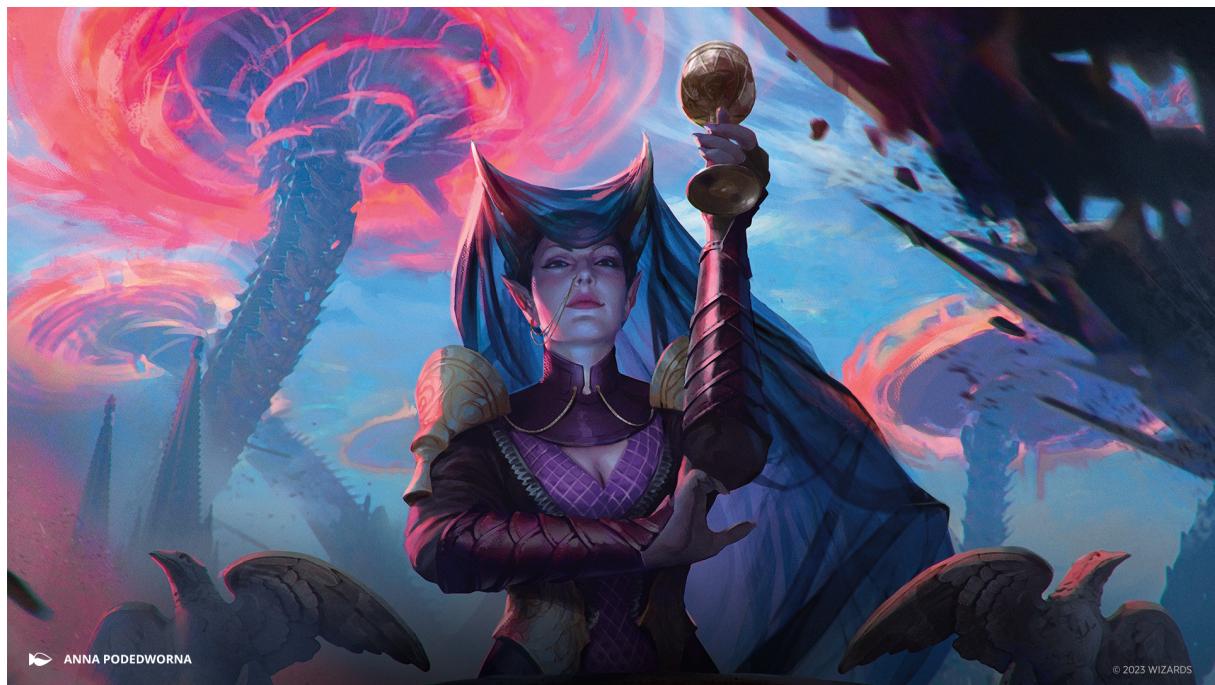
"What long fingers you have, my queen," Chulane stuttered as he scrambled to his feet.

"What is so important, storyteller?" Ayara asked in the sweetest voice imaginable. Her voice was so compelling that Rankle maneuvered for a better view.

"Evil is coming, my queen," Chulane said. "The skies will soon open, and unimaginable horrors will rain down upon us."

"Is that so?" Ayara murmured. "Well, come inside and tell me everything."

As the two passed by him, Rankle caught a glimpse of Ayara's face. He felt like he'd been smacked by a troll. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't think. He just lay in the center of the road while knights spurred their horses onward and the carriage rolled over him, leaving strange black tracks in its wake.



Art by: Anna Podedworna

But Rankle took no notice of this, for he was *smitten*. The way was clear for the first time since Mags stabbed him with her pokey stick. He knew what he must do. He must become Ayara's next husband.

Rankle skipped down the lane toward the village with a song in his heart. He'd never bothered to find a mate, but he considered himself a master in the affairs of the heart. Only one strategy would win the queen's heart: magic. Specifically, a love charm, potion, or spell—or maybe all three. And for those, he needed the help of a witch.

When Rankle arrived in Edgewall, he strolled down the deserted streets. The shuttered shops showed no signs of life. The only sound was the creaking wooden sign for the Three Pigs Butcher Shop. But as he neared his destination, rats began emerging from the sewers. Soon they were streaming out of the gutter, a veritable rat parade. The Piper was going to have his work cut out for him.

By the time Rankle reached the charm shop, the rats were scurrying up the walls of the shops and lining up along the top edge of the roof with their little faces toward the sky. Their strange behavior broke Rankle out of his revel. A ring of swirling smog tinged with a red glow marked the sky above the village. Rankle shrugged. It was a day for strange magics. Rankle needed some strange magics of his own.

With a flourish, he yanked open the door to the charms shop and barged into the dark, musty interior. "I need a love potion," he announced to the empty room—which, knowing witches—was probably not empty.

"Go away, little fae," said a disembodied voice. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

"I can't see you at all," Rankle said reasonably. "And I'm not leaving until I get what I want."

The empty room sighed. When nothing happened, Rankle went to a nearby shelf jammed full of skulls, herbs, and a rainbow of colorful potions.

"These are nice," Rankle mused, running his finger along the glass bottles.

"Don't touch," the empty room admonished him.

Rankle grabbed a large bottle with a golden liquid and held it over his head.

"Hold on—"

Rankle smashed the bottle on the floor. Searing white light burst upward, singeing his hair and scorching the ceiling, but Rankle didn't pause. He reached for another bottle—blood red, how fun! But a shimmer in the corner made him hesitate. When the glamour dispersed, an elegant—and very irritated—woman towered over him.

"What if you just smashed the very thing you came for?" she asked.

Rankle stopped, impressed by the woman's mind-reading powers. "How do you know what I came for?"

The witch wearily rubbed her eyes. "Why do you want a love potion?"

"I must marry Queen Ayara!" Rankle proclaimed.

"You and everyone else from here to Garenbrig," the witch said. "Love potions are creepy, and we have bigger problems. Now, hurry along. I must finish my packing."

Rankle reached for a bottle of pickled grubs. “What problem? The rats? Is this a love potion? It’s not, right?”

“No” the witch began.

Rankle smashed the bottle. The glass smashed, the liquid sloshed over his feet, and the grubs began bouncing around the room like tiny rubber balls.

“Ooh,” Rankle said, impressed.

Suddenly, there was a whoosh of air, and Rankle was magically whisked off the ground. Motionless and hovering, he found himself nose to nose with the witch.

“You have pretty eyes,” Rankle muttered. “But not as nice as my Ayara.”

“You are just a little void of destruction and misery, aren’t you,” the witch hissed. “I’m leaving Edgewall to rendezvous with some kin of yours”

“Mags and that lot?” Rankle interrupted. “We’re not related, and they’re mean as a bag of badgers.”

“No, your taller, more erudite, and less unruly kin,” she said. “I’m going to give you a choice.”

Rankle was tired of being in one place for so long and struggled ineffectually against the witch’s invisible grasp.

“You should come with me,” the witch offered. “We’re joining forces to fight the doom that’s coming.”

Rankle was barely listening. Not moving was torture. He tried to kick, flap, claw, and bite, but no muscle moved.

“You can’t tell me what to do!” he howled.

“Or you can go on a quest to find a special love flower, which will win Ayara’s heart forever.”

Rankle stopped struggling. “Love flower,” he said.

The witch rolled her eyes. “I’m shocked by your choice. It’s a long and difficult journey. And you must promise not to return to Edgewall until you find it.”

“Love flower!” Rankle yelled as the witch released him from her spell, and he tumbled unceremoniously onto the floor.

The witch loomed over him. “Do not abandon your quest because you’re tired, hungry, or bored. Promise me, little fae.”

Rankle got up, brushed himself off, and grinned. “I’m Rankle. And you have my word,” he promised.

Rankle was tired and bored, but he wasn’t hungry thanks to his pocket full of pickled grubs.

He’d followed the witch’s directions, but there were no flowers in this part of the forest, which was murky, unfamiliar, and teeming with ravens. Strange booming noises echoed above and made the birds fly in all directions—except up. Rankle couldn’t see the sky through the dark branches knotted overhead. And he couldn’t smell any faeries anywhere, which meant that the witch had probably sent him into hostile territory.

Maybe she’d sent him on a fool’s errand for reasons he couldn’t begin to fathom. Maybe even the flower was a falsehood.

“Whoever heard of a “Long-Lasting Lilac of Longing” anyway?” Rankle muttered to the nearest raven, who seemed to be cowering inside the hollow of a tree. “This is a dumb quest.”

Dejected, he abandoned his search and headed back to Edgewall. He was nearing the boundary lands when a herd of elk burst out of the thicket and nearly trampled him. He escaped by hop-fluttering and pulling himself onto a low branch as they thundered past.

“Rude!” he called after them. He was about to jump down when a strange creature lurched into the clearing. Rankle squinted at the beast’s white spikes and glowing red ribs. It had three tails and no eyes and was the size and shape of a dog. A thick black liquid drooled out of its mouth. Dogs slobbered. So, close enough.

“Hullo, puppy,” Rankle said, hopping down from his branch. He liked dogs.

But as he approached it, a low hum began emanating from its chest, and the spines on its back unfolded. Suddenly, one of its tails shot over its back and lashed out at Rankle, who was only saved by his quick feet, which moved him out of the way before he realized what was happening.

“Bad dog!” Rankle shouted. But the beast lashed at him again, and he was forced to flit and dodge, desperately trying to avoid the great slobbering jaws. He yelped out an incantation that didn’t deter its attack. Backed against the tree, he threw stones, grubs, and magic dust—to no avail. He scrunched down and closed his eyes—thinking of the lovely Ayara—as the beast huffed and opened its jaws. Hiding behind his eyelids, Rankle heard a mechanical yelp, metal scraping, and a squish. He opened his eyes and saw the beast in two halves and a red-bearded dwarf yanking his axe out of the carnage. Rankle’s eyes darted from the leaking corpse to the massive axe to a golden ring glowing on the dwarf’s finger.

“That’s a nice “ Rankle caught himself. Best to admire the ring secretly—for now. “That’s a nice axe,” he finished.

“Hurry,” the dwarf said. “There’s more on the way.”

Seeing as how the dwarf had a big axe *and* a shiny ring, Rankle followed.



Art by: Viko Menezes

The night was unnaturally black and foul. Strange creatures chittered from the shadows. But the worst thing of all was the dwarf. Torbran, Thane of Something or Other, would not shut up about evil seed pods and a really mean tree. But at least Torbran had found them a nice cave halfway up a cliff to spend the night, and the dwarf would have to sleep sometime.

"The courts have fallen," the dwarf said in a quivery voice. "The Kenriths are gone."

Rankle yawned and tried to get comfortable on the cave's rocky floor.

"Tomorrow, we must make our stand against these foul invaders. I have a very important task, and I will need your help. When we arrive at Lothwain "

Rankle perked up. Lothwain? He couldn't believe his luck. The dwarf had led him directly to his true love. With a little luck, he would have a new ring for his marriage proposal.

"You will see the gravity of our task." Torbran continued. But then a strange noise stopped him. It sounded like the lowering of a drawbridge combined with screaming. It reverberated around the cave and echoed across the valley. The dwarf grabbed his axe and peered outside into the darkness.

"Do not fear," Torbran said when the sound faded away. "We have laid a trap for these monsters. I must find a way to play my part. Fate has brought us together "

Rankle fake-snored as loudly as he could, hoping the dwarf would finally take a hint. Torbran sighed and settled against the wall, wrapping his cloak around him and keeping one hand on the axe. Soon, he was snoring for real.

Rankle waited until just before dawn. He crept silently to the entrance and surveyed his surroundings. The cliffside cave overlooked the grange and Lothwain Castle, just as he suspected. Roiling storm clouds obscured everything but the spires of the floating castle, and there were some very strange

beanstalks coming out of the clouds, but that was inconsequential to the next phase of his plan: steal the ring off Torbran's finger.

Rankle sat down near, but not too near, the sleeping dwarf. He took some faerie dust out of his pocket and sprinkled it on the golden ring. Quietly, he muttered an incantation and was delighted to see that it worked. The ring had transformed into a caterpillar. Rankle could barely contain his excitement as it crawled off Torbran's finger and inched across the ground toward him. Unfortunately, before it reached him, the dwarf opened his eyes.

"I can't believe I fell asleep," Torbran said. "Gather yourself. We must set out at once."

Rankle kept one eye on the creeping ring-turned-caterpillar. If only it would reach him before the dwarf noticed that

"My ring is gone!" Torbran shouted.

Quick as you please, Rankle scooped up the caterpillar while Torbran frantically searched around him. The dwarf's panic confirmed Rankle's suspicion: this wasn't just a shiny ring. It was a shiny, magical ring.

"Did you take it?" Torbran demanded.

Rankle shook his head and began licking the caterpillar to remove the magical dust.

"What are you doing?" Torbran thundered. "Have you lost your wits?"

With one last lick, the caterpillar turned back into a ring. Rankle stood up and hid the ring behind his back, but the jig was up. Torbran looked shocked, crestfallen even.

"Are you going to cry?" Rankle asked.

"I saved your life, and this is how you repay me?" Torbran asked.

"Is it a wishing ring?" Rankle wondered. "I've always wanted a wishing ring."

"It is not," Torbran said, but there was a slight warble to his voice.

"Well, let's find out. I wish for a basket of goodies!"

Torbran lunged at him, tripping over the basket of cookies that had suddenly appeared. He was about to lunge again when Rankle held up his hand.

"Come after me again, and I'll wish you were a turtle," Rankle warned. "In a swamp. Miles from here."

Torbran backed away. "Did you not hear me last night? Our kind is meant to work together."

Rankle picked up the basket and twirled around the cave marveling at his good fortune. He had a wishing ring *and* a basket of cookies!

"Our home has been violated," Torbran said. "We have one chance to stop them, but I need my ring."

"Should I wish Ayara was here?" Rankle asked. "Or that it's our wedding day? Or is that rushing it?"

"How can you think about marrying Ayara when the plane is doomed?" Torbran demanded. "Open your eyes! Those abominations have overrun the courts and are coming for fae kind next."

"Those are my future subjects," Rankle protested. "*Abominations* is a bit mean, don't you think?"

"Everything you care about will be destroyed unless you give me that ring," Torbran shouted.

Rankle paused. Ayara might be destroyed? He didn't want that.

"So, with this ring, you can just wish away this what did you call it, invasion?" Rankle asked.

Torbran wrung his hands in frustration. "No, I can't wish for something so powerful and far-reaching. It must be something of this plane, if that makes any sense to you."

"It sounds like I have more of a plan than you do," Rankle said. "Let's go with mine."

"No, I have plan" Torbran began.

"I wish for a love potion!" Rankle interrupted. A pink, sparkly potion instantly appeared in his hand.

Torbran squeaked and spluttered and squeaked again. Rankle hot-footed it out of the cave and down the slope toward Locthwain. Torbran lumbered behind him, still squeak-spluttering.

"Have you seen Ayara?" Rankle called over his shoulder. "She's as beautiful as a sunrise. As delicate as dew on the morning rose. As wise as a thousand sages."

Behind him, Torbran finally found his words: "Give me the ring! There's only one wish left."

They had nearly reached the valley when the clouds dispersed as if waved away by a giant, and Locthwain was unveiled. Rankle froze. No longer hovering, the castle had crashed into the ground, its spire canted at an unnatural angle, and its battlements freakishly transformed. The sky writhed with the strange, metallic beanstalks.

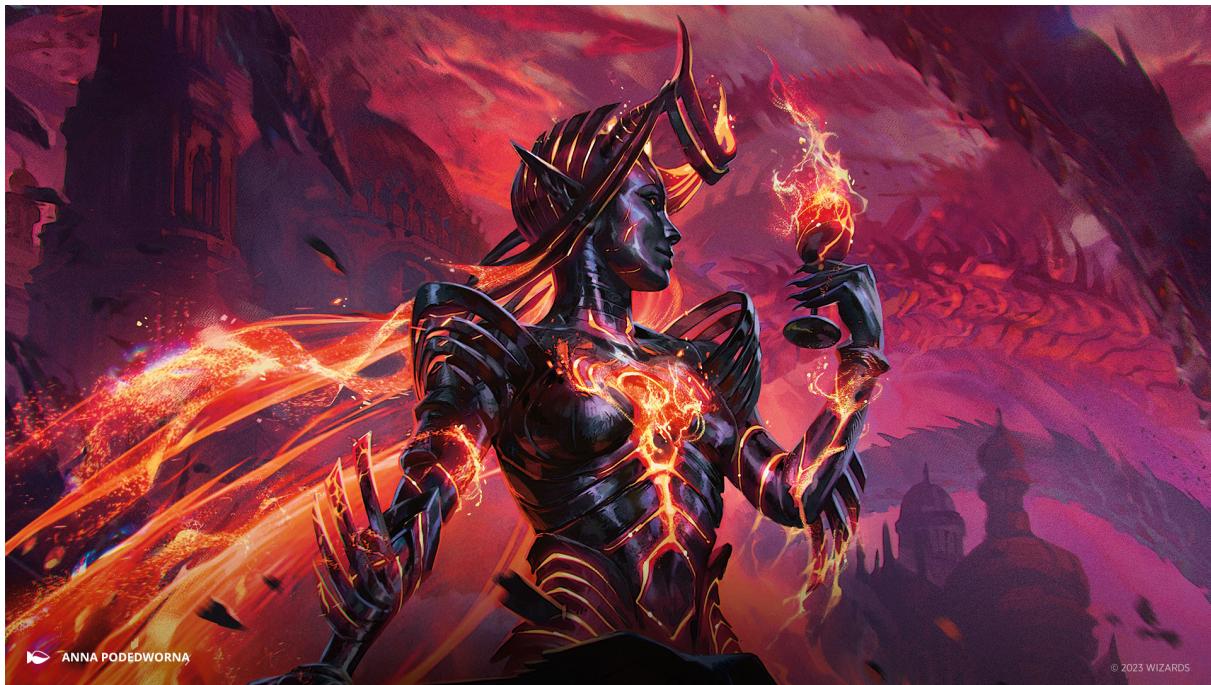
"How can you not weep for what Eldraine has become?" Torbran whispered beside him.

Legions of Locthwain knights stood in formation, ready for battle. But they were no longer the regal soldiers he'd seen on the hillside. Their armor had infested their skin, and ropes of red sinew and white spikes had become horrible adornments on their bodies. Flocks of strange dogs slobbered beside grim carriages of white bone and red flesh.

"There's so many of them," Rankle said, awed by the sheer numbers in the valley.

A trumpet sounded, and the queen emerged from the grim castle. To Rankle's shock, she was not herself. Her flesh had been replaced with dark plates and glowing embers. Spikes jutted out of her arms and face. Her heart beat within a hollow ribcage as she marshaled her troops in a harsh, unfamiliar language.

Rankle stared at the love potion clutched in his hands. "Perhaps I was too hasty in my affections."



Art by: Anna Podedworna

"As you waste wishes, we are fighting in the wilds, trying to save our plane," Torbran said.

Suddenly, the ground moved beneath their feet, and a deafening rumble resonated across the valley. Vast and deep, it seemed to emanate from the very heart of the plane. Torbran got down on his knees, placed his hands on Rankle's shoulders, and looked him in the eye: "A great chasm is about to open in the valley. I don't know how yet, but I must lure our enemies into that chasm. I'm begging you. Please give me the ring."

Rankle stared out across the valley. "Into the chasm, you say," he murmured.

Torbran nodded solemnly. "That ring is our only chance to save our plane," he said.

Rankle allowed himself one last look at Queen Ayara. Then he gazed into the hopeful eyes of the dwarf. Rankle nodded sadly and held out the ring. Torbran's face brightened until Rankle opened his mouth.

"I wish it would rain" Rankle screamed.

Shocked, Torbran sank to the ground in despair. "You've killed us all."

"I wish it would rain *this!*" Rankle finished, holding up the love potion.

Instantly, the skies opened, and drops of pink rain began to fall. Nearby, the ground roiled and cracked open with a thunderous boom. A great rift slashed across the valley where solid ground had been moments before. The enchanted rain drenched the hordes, who milled about in confusion.

"Behold me," Rankle screamed to them. "For I am your king!"

"Wait!" Torbran cried. "What are you doing?"

"There's so many of them," Rankle said gleefully. "Wait 'til Mags sees me now!"

Torbran grabbed for him, but Rankle easily dodged and leaped off the hillside. Flapping his one good wing, he clumsily soared toward the chasm.

By now, every twisted knight, twittering abomination, and gargling monstrosity had their eyes on the faerie, who landed near the edge of the chasm. Rankle hop-fluttered along the edge. Under the influence of the love potion downpour, they were instantly lovestruck by the tiny fae. Hearts aflame, the entire legion moved en masse toward their heart's desire. Rankle stopped on the edge and faced off against the chittering masses.

"Catch me if you can!" he howled and fell backward into the chasm.

Wave after wave followed him, pouring over the edge like lovestruck lemmings. Desperately flapping, Rankle managed to hover mid-air as the legions hurled themselves toward him and fell to the bottom of the chasm. Pleased by the longing in their beguiled eyes, Rankle drank in their screeches of adoration.

Suddenly, a new sound competed with the wails and meaty thuds of falling hordes. It was a beautiful sound: ancient, powerful, and familiar. It was both nowhere and all around him. A powerful spell of many voices, Rankle realized. He was getting sleepy, and his lone wing was no longer holding him aloft. As he slowly sunk toward the bodies piled up below, Rankle could see that everyone in the chasm had fallen into an unnatural sleep. *Must be part of Torbran's plan*, Rankle thought to himself not caring at all. Surrounded by his devoted admirers, he slowly drifted down to rest on a throne of fallen admirers. He'd never felt so wanted. He'd never been so loved.