

Tale Two: Villarea's Tale

by Michael J. Allen

The roar of volcanic eruption filled smoke darkened skies. Beneath the glowering clouds, a weathered rock cone rose up and calmly mirrored its angry parent. The mountain's son, as it was often called, differed in one other way from its father. The top was crowned with a circlet of silver steel. Four silver steel spires rose from the circlet, not at the cardinal points but offset so that the space between them faced the four compass points. A spiral stair led to the crumpled form of a young elven woman centered between the crown's flares. Ash fell like tears to mix with her own. It touched her black hair and left streaks of grey and silver.

Around the base, a sea of anguished elven faces waited for her to rise.

Villarea ah Thrae'Myn waded in the surf under the sky and cloud conflagration caused by the sun's rise. Spray ran down her long hair. Rainbow hues sparked from its black surface beneath sunrise caress. A magic bolt sprang from her fingertips, lanced into the water with a splash and struck its mark. She placed the stunned fish in a floating basket tethered to her waist.

"Villarea!"

Villarea whipped around. An adolescent girl rushed toward her on the beach. Short hair the color of raven's wings fluttered behind her.

"What is it, Estellena?"

She stopped at the water's edge to recapture her breath. Villarea emerged from the water displaying far more curves than she normally displayed in the open. She picked up and donned an elegant tapered robe.

"There's humans in the village. Mother says you must come," Estellena said.

Villarea led her sister back through the wood to their village. A crowd gathered around the base of the mountain's son. The crowd parted for her. A woman gowned in sea blue turned to her.

She addressed Villarea in elven, "These men have come for a Thrae Jewel."

Well traced lines formed on Villarea's face, accentuating her frown, "You have declined."

"I haven't answered yet."

Their leader wore magus robes, filigreed violet and red on black silk. The others were soldiers, though their armor matched the design. The mage interrupted with a grating voice, "Chieftain Shylles?"

Villarea raked the man with her eyes and silenced him with a glare, "What makes them presume themselves worthy of such a gift?"

"They say their land is torn by war, their lord requires it to save his people."

Villarea locked eyes with the mage. He smiled in what he appeared to think was an encouraging way. She returned her attention to her mother, "Chieftain, look into their eyes. Surely you can see they're not worthy. Where's their lord? Why hasn't he come if the need is so dire?"

Shylles's eyes flashed, echoed by the silver embroidery of her gown, "You need to be less distrustful if you will one day lead, my child."

Villarea bristled. The other elves around them shifted with unease.

"What is your decision?" Villarea asked.

Shylles turned back to the mage and addressed him in his own language, "Our heart goes out to you, but we cannot give you a Jewel."

His demeanor transformed in an instant. "You will give a jewel, stupid woman, or you'll regret it."

His soldiers reached for their weapons.

Elves rushed in, creating a wall between their chieftain and the humans. Villarea pushed her way in front of them. "You will leave in peace, now."

"Get out of my way," he demanded.

She refused to budge.

His hands snapped up and magic burst from his mouth. A shockwave lanced from him. Villarea stood her ground. A hum emanated from the neck of her robe. The shockwave struck a glowing wall. The hum faded.

“This is the last time I will allow you to leave in peace,” Villarea said.

“This isn’t over,” the magus snarled.

He led his men away. As they departed, two of the soldiers murmured to one another.

“How’d she do that? She had no time to cast.”

“I don’t know,” the other said.

“She has a Jewel,” the magus said, “now be silent.”

Villarea climbed the mountain’s son and watched them go. From its height, the forest, the ocean and the farther off father stretched across the horizon. Estellena joined her, gazing between the crown’s spires at the retreating men.

“We should keep an eye on them,” Villarea said at last.

“But they’re leaving, aren’t they?”

Villarea turned to her sister and smiled. It expanded beyond her face. “No, little one, they aren’t leaving until they get what they want.”

“Do you think mother will give it to them?”

“No,” said Villarea. The smile faded, “So they’ll try and take it.”

Estellena watched her older sister for a while. Villarea glance over at her here and there to see the younger girl concentrating on her.

“What are you trying to figure out?” Villarea asked.

Estellena lowered her eyes, “Nothing.”

She fled from the mountain’s son.

Villarea took her Thrae Jewel out. She stared into the glassy sphere. Colors swirled beneath its surface, alternating through the five elements. She replaced it beneath her robe and headed back

to the sea. She removed her robe and waded back into the water. A subtle prickle clung to her spine. Every few fish, she checked the beach to see if someone was there.

She finished her harvest without interruption, but the feeling stuck with her.

She did not wait long for her suspicions to materialize, though she never expected their form.

The volcano erupted. The ground rocked violently. Smoke pored into the heavens and ash rained down on them.

She rushed to the mountain's son. Magma burned its way down the mountain. Heat washed through their woods, incinerating some trees and igniting others. Certainly, the narrow isthmus that connected their territory to the rest of Maeran Essen was blocked by Thrae's blood.

She raced back down the ground. The Thrae'Myn pressed in around her.

"Villarea, what shall we do?" they asked her.

"The chieftain will know," Villarea said.

"The Chieftain headed for the volcano. She said you would take charge," someone said.

Villarea froze. She snapped her head around, "Why did the Chieftain go to the volcano?"

"Something about Estellena."

Villarea scanned the crowd. She darted toward the volcano, but they cut her off. A curse alighted on her tongue but never saw voice, "Bring your children, the elders and what you must have to survive. Bring it here to the mountain's son. I'll return."

She raced through the woods, sweat poring from her. She knew every tree and where it stood, but she had to evade falling limbs aflame. The air buffeted her and warned her back. She continued without heed. The forest disappeared. In its charred remains, she saw a figure crumpled beneath a fading glow. Villarea called upon her Jewel and rushed into the heat. Her mother's shield disappear just before her own surrounded the chieftain. In that moment, the heat burned her mother's hair from her body and scorched her skin.

Villarea closed her hand on her Jewel and waved her other hand, "*Ileo!*"

Shylles's body floated into the air, still curled in a ball. Villarea scoured the area, there were no signs of anyone else. She hurried back to the village with her mother pulled behind.

The healers rushed forward around Shylles. She struggled against them, refusing to uncurl. Villarea stepped in, offering whispered assurances daughter to mother. Shylles uncurled, thrust something into Villarea's hands and returned to a fetal position.

Villarea stared at the object. The healers took her mother away. The object was Estellena's Thrae Jewel. It was unmistakable. Villarea had chided Estellena for keeping it, but it was the first she ever made. Though imperfect, Estellena refused to dispose of it.

The inferno raged toward them. Trees crashed to the ground, now bringing dwellings and concourses to the ground with them. Villarea erupted from her daze. She raced the path to the top of the Mountain's son and ripped her Jewel out of her robes. She held it up with one hand and began to chant. The Jewel blazed, filling the area with unbearable light.

At the foot of the stone, her tribe huddled together within the massive sphere which held back the heat. Hours raged on, the volcano beyond reconciliation.

Villarea lay crumpled upon the mountain's son. Her people waited for her to rise from the mountainous efforts of the last few days. The ashes of her Jewel scattered around her, destroyed in the effort. In her hand, she cradled Estellena's Jewel. Through the crack in its surface, she could hear the wash of the surf, the roar of flame, the whisper of the wind, and the rumble of the earth. This music from the Thrae Jewel rent her heart.

Estellena would not have surrendered her stone. She must be lost.

"Take what boats we have. Shelter in the sea as you need. We must leave Natholen," Villarea said.

"Why must we go?" asked a healer.

“We must go because those men will return. Our wood is gone, our defenses burned away. We must hide beneath the shelter of our kindred. We must disappear,” Villarea said. She paused and steeled herself for her next act, “We are Thrae’Myn no longer. We are Lith’Los.”

“But the Thrae Jewels,” someone objected.

“We forsake our birthright and thus lose it. Without it, these men will want us no longer.”

The silence that followed echoed off the heavens.

Villarea gave a sad smile, “All is not lost. We will return here in one century. Then we shall be Thrae’Myn again. We’ll rebuild. It’s a long winter, but we’ll see spring again. Go now, in small groups and join our kindred in their homes. Surely they will give us solace.”

The tribe meandered away. She watched them go, reeling in disbelief at her own decree.

“What of your mother?” a healer asked.

Villarea fled his eye, “Take her with you. Tell her I am sorry.”

“You’ll not go with us?” he asked.

Villarea’s face fell further. She shook her head and walked away in silence. Overhead swarms of dark birds circled looking for flesh. They were disappointed, few had perished. She climbed the mountain’s son to look one last time at the ruin of her homeland. From atop one of the crown’s spires, a raven watched her.

She met its eye. It cocked its head back and forth. It cawed. A jolt ran through her. She felt its consciousness in her mind, felt its emotions in her heart. She met its gaze and searched it through disbelief.

“You would chose me? Now?”

The raven cawed again.

It was a joke cruel beyond belief, yet she almost laughed. She searched and studied for a familiar spirit for years. Unable to find one that would bind to her, she gave up. Now, on the edge of oblivion, this winged herald of death chose her as his mistress.

Villarea fled Natholen through the surf.

She moved with the wind, ever reminded of her ruined home by the smell of the breeze. Her course took her south along the coast through many sleepy hamlets and fishing villages. The night she entered the first human settlement, she was accosted by a trio of drunken men. They grabbed her, draping themselves over her. Before she could object, they took to fighting amongst them about who deserved her. She didn't know who won the fight, but she saw to it the prize was well down the road.

Days turned weeks and autumn to winter. Snow coated the peaks of the Talon Mountains far to the west. Tears erupted from her with each glance at their white blanket. The weather was still fair along the southern coast, but the night cloaked her within frigid solitude.

On a day whose number she had lost count of, she gazed up at the edge of an elven wood glowing in the noonlight. She knelt at its edge. Villarea slid fingertips into the earth. Her heart fell. The land rejected her, she could not befriend it. She rose, stiff and tall. She strode into the wood, eyes blind to its splendor. Hidden kindred watched her go.

When Villarea was long past, a single child asked a question, "Why did she not greet us?"

Her Mother patted the little girl on the head, "She is *Lab Tsaiken A'Lyathen*."

The child's eyes widened, "The wood rejected her?"

Her mother looked away, her response barely a whisper, "No, it was she that rejected our wood."

Villarea traveled on. The chill about her deepened with each dance of daylight star and the twin sisters. She ran across a gnome city, rolling along the road in a full blown brawl of colors. She paced them that day and stopped with them at night. The joy and exuberance displayed by both old and young alike warmed her.

She shared their fire and watched them frolic. Bittersweet memories traversed her face. A whirling girl brought Villarea's thoughts to Estellena.

She smiled.

"Ah, that's the spirit," Said a bright voice.

Villarea looked up. Before her stood a gnome and a dwarf. The odd pair struck her dumb, unable to find her voice.

“Hallo there!” said the gnome, beaming.

She stared at him.

His brow wrinkled. He looked at the dwarf next to him. The dwarf shrugged.

The chestnut skinned gnome looked thoughtful a moment and then beamed once again. With a flamboyant bow which shook his purple garb and gave rise to a jingling noise, he greeted Villarea again. “Hallo. I am Pochelknott Vulcrum, Legendary Bard. Son of the Vulcrum Family Bards, center of all gnome society. I am pleased to make your acquaintance, unless of course you are a villain.”

She leapt to her feet and towered over him, "I'm no villain."

"Ha! I knew I could get you to talk," said Pochelknott.

The dwarf rolled his eyes.

“This is my companion, Kierak. He’s a dwarf you know, so any rudeness is probably just his way.”

She couldn't help herself. She burst out laughing.

Kierak growled through short black beard at the gnome before bowing, “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Pardon him, milady, we'll leave you to your business.”

“See, I told you he’d be rude,” Pochelknott said.

"Keep your tongue, you foolish stump," Kierak said. He started to lead the gnome away but seemed to have second thoughts. He settled in next to her and fixed Villarea with a gaze, "What troubles you child?"

Her face flushed. *Child?* Her glower struck the dwarf. Her eyes softened, *How old is this dwarf?* "My trouble are my own, Master Dwarf."

Kierak nodded several times, "Often wise to keep your business to yourself, but I only wish to make amends for his foolishness. Is there nothing I can offer you?"

"Are there any elven cities in these parts? Preferably one not in a wood."

The gnome's jaw went slack.

Kierak's face did not change, "Aye, there's Anthelis a few weeks south."

"What kind of city is it?" she asked.

"A port city, center of trade for the elven tribes in southern Maeran Essen," Kierak said.

She smiled and placed a hand on his arm, "I'm in your debt."

"Nonsense," the dwarf scoffed.

Villarea set off at dawn. The gnome city would take the same road, but now she found purpose drove her feet. The miles melted even if the chill did not. She broke onto the edge of a grassy plain. In the distance, a city stretched toward the sun.

"Pardon us, Lady. We'd parlay with you a moment."

She whipped around. Four men strolled toward her from the wood's edge a little ways farther inland. Three were unremarkable, but the fourth sent fire through her veins. His features were elven, but softened by the pollution of human blood. Worse his black leather was edged with violet and studded with red.

Villarea scowled. "I see neither reason to pardon nor to parlay. Good day to you."

She hurried down the road, but one of them grabbed her arm and twisted her around, "That wasn't nice. You got to be nice to the boss."

She shook off his grip and stared at the half-elf, "What do you want?"

A smile skulked up one side of the half-elf's face, "You wouldn't happen to know anything about elven tribes, would you? The Thrae'Myn perhaps?"

Ice washed through her veins, "No, I wouldn't."

The men shared eager glances. Their leader continued, "Really? A fine upstanding elven lady like yourself not schooled in the lore of the first generation tribes?"

"The Thrae'Myn were destroyed ages ago," she said. She turned a murderous glare upon the others, "by humans."

"Well, that's a shame," he said.

"Well, if that's all then," Villarea turned to go.

"Just one more thing, you wouldn't happen to be Lith'Los would you?"

All color washed from Villarea's features. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears and her stomach tightened. Her fingertips itched and power surged through her. Estellena's Jewel burned beneath her robes.

"I thought so," he said, "Get her."

Sword ripped from their scabbard.

She raised her hands. Flashes of orange and white blazed across her finger tips.

They rushed her as one man and drove her into the ground before she could complete the spell. Her breathe exploded from her lungs. Colored lights danced in her vision and black washed out from the corners of her sight.

One of the men stood, hand to his belt, lasciviousness in his grin. A flash of white caught him in the torso and threw him several feet. Heads shot up and their bodies followed. Another man grabbed at his chest, his knees buckled and he fell. The other two followed him to the grave.

Villarea struggled to part the haze. A verdant clad elf with short, crimson-gold hair, silvered with age, rummaged through the half-elf's clothes. He whipped open a scroll.

"*Deb'Kassi!*" he said then frowned. He turned to Villarea, "I apologize, milady, I forgot myself. Are you well?"

Villarea felt alright, but couldn't manage to part the haze in her eyes. She couldn't quite focus on her savior's face. "I think so."

He crumpled the scroll in one fist and offered her a hand. She regained her feet with his help. His face drew nearer, but she still couldn't focus. She felt his piercing gaze despite her inability to see it.

"I'm glad you're well. Your sight will clear soon, that was a nasty blow. I'm sorry to hasten your recovery and add more to your burden, but saving you has placed me in an untenable position and I must request your help in exchange for my services with these brutes."

"I'll not--" she said.

"You'll not be asked to do more than deliver a message," he thrust a small chest and a small parchment into her hands, "Take this chest to Anthelis and sail out with tomorrow's tide to the city of Haven. My ticket will cover your fare. Give the chest to Haven's liege. Tell him Auron sent you. Remain in Haven, I'll come for you there and reward you for your service. I swear on my tribe."

Before she could answer he darted into the wood. She hurried after him, but even to her trained eye there were no traces. He was gone.

Villarea walked into Anthelis still in a daze. Her vision was now crystal clear, but the whirlwind in her mind blinded her. Before she knew what had become her, she was staring out over the aft of a sailing vessel, watching Maeran Essen disappear.