

A Way Home

Faye Valentine

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Weaving through the crowded, smoke-filled and noisy tavern, Valarria expertly dodged the pinching fingers and groping hands of half-drunk patrons attempting to get a feel of the shapely behind encased in a much too tight split-sided dress that showed off her toned, milky white leg. Stopping at a table of five scruffy-looking men downing plates of roasted pork, baked potatoes and thick slices of bread lathered in butter, she refilled two of their mugs from the pitcher of mead she carried in her right hand and was about to top off a third when an arm wrapped around her waist.

Before the drunk man had time to pull her onto his lap, she spun free and with practiced skill drew the razor-sharp knife she kept strapped to her right thigh and pressed the edge against his throat. "I strongly suggest you remove your hand before I remove it for you," she said with an icy coldness.

"You need to learn to loosen up and have fun, wench," the man replied. Slowly sliding his arm back, he stopped and gave her backside a hard squeeze.

"And you need to learn some manners." Spinning like a ballerina, she grabbed the man's wrist, slammed his hand on the table and then pinned it in place with a swift downward stab of the knife. "Anyone else feeling frisky?"

"You fucking bitch!" the injured man growled. "I'll rip..."

"I'd choose your next words carefully," Thoban – the tavern's nearly eight foot tall half-ogre bouncer said as he took up a defensive position next to Valarria. "Better yet, I suggest you and your friends leave."

"I paid for..."

Leaning in so close their noses nearly touched, Thoban growled as only one of his kind could. Low. Guttural. The sound that rumbled from his throat was like the shaking of a mountain during an avalanche. "I said leave." Pulling the slender blade from the man's hand he wiped it clean in his shirt before handing it back to the grinning barmaid. When the man did not move, Thoban yanked him from his seat with brutal efficiency and dragged him kicking and screaming towards the door which he opened with his free hand. Holding him by the back of the neck, he turned him towards the rest of the patrons who watched in stunned silence. "The next time one of you feels the urge to touch the barmaids without permission know that I'm watching." Taking a big step back, Thoban chucked the humiliated man out into the night – the entire tavern wincing as his body hit the ground some twenty-odd feet below. There was a brief pause and then conversations, meals and drinking resumed.

Walking up to the huge bouncer, Valarria lightly traced a finger down his well-muscled right arm and to the hand holding her knife. "Thanks, big guy, but I had it under control," she said, taking the blade from his massive hand and sliding it back into the sheath strapped onto her thigh.

"I'm sure you did, but now they'll think twice before touching you."

"Perhaps while they're sober, but there's no telling what a drunken fool might do when presented the opportunity."

"Table aren't going to wait themselves," Grimshaw – the tavern's half-orc barkeep shouted.

"We'll talk later," Valarria said, giving Thoban a knowing smile before spinning on the heels of her knee-high, soft leather boots and walking off. Eyes stopping at a table in the furthest corner from the door, she stared with focused interest at the sleek blackleaf armor they each

wore. A symbol of prestige in the Elven army, each set of armor was comprised of hundreds of leaf-shaped segments forged in dragon's fire. To see one set was a rare honor, so Valarria was immediately suspicious at the sight of four. Walking over to the table wearing her usual chipper grin, she greeted them. "Greeting, and welcome to the Water Sprite. How may I serve you this evening?"

"A bottle of elven wine if you've got it," the oldest amongst the group replied.

Valarria's gaze lingered momentarily on his fine features marred by a wicked scar zig-zagging from the bridge of his nose, across the left cheek and down his neck where it disappeared beyond beneath the collar of his armor. "We have Zairith thirty-three, Eyselthyr twenty-nine and Aeredale thirty-four. Which would Sirs prefer?"

"Eyselthyr twenty-nine."

"A fine choice. I'll get that right out to you. In the meantime, would you like anything else?"

"I could go with an evening of you sitting on my lap," the one to her right said with a hearty laugh.

"I'm flattered, but I don't fraternize with posers," she scoffed.

"Posers? Lady, do you have any idea who you're talking to? One word from us and..."

"And what?" she said, making a show of displaying the knife sheathed on her thigh. "I'm sorry, but I just remembered we're all out of elven wine. Perhaps you should go elsewhere."

"You really don't want to piss us off lady," the older man said with an eerie coolness that would have made any sane person pause and carefully consider their next words. But Valarria was a woman as impulsive as she was beautiful.

"You wear the armor of the Elite, but your manners speak otherwise. Show me your marks and the wine is on me." The look on their faces told her she had caught them in the lie. "Is that even real blackleaf?" None of them saw the knife leave the sheath, but they all watched as it swiftly slid across the forearm of their leader leaving behind a silvery trail of freshly scratched steel. "Didn't think so. We don't take kindly to fakes around here so if you value your lives I strongly suggest leaving the city while you still have lives to leave with."

"Taking that tone with the Elite is..."

"Show me your marks."

"Excuse me?"

"I said, show me your marks. If you truly are with the Elite then you'll have been marked as such. Show me. Prove me wrong and I'll give you everything you desire."

"Careful what you say, wench, or you might just get more than you can handle. Now shove off and get our wine before we burn this place to the ground," the elf to her left replied.

"Her voice low and laced with venom, Valarria stared into the older elf's eyes. "I said show me your marks."

"And I said..." the elf's word caught in his throat as the barmaid unbuttoned the cuff of her blouse and slowly pulled the sleeve up to reveal the small black leaf tattooed and then branded into the tender white flesh of her wrist marking her as one of the Elven Elite. "You...y-you're...but..."

"You're going to stand up, strip naked and walk out of here in shame. And if I ever see you in Enendell again mine will be the last face you ever lay eyes on."

Dozens of men and women watching, the four elves stood. The one on Valarria's left looked as if he was about to bolt for the door when a knife at his throat stopped him dead in his tracks before he found himself dead on the floor.

“Goddesses be damned!” Grimshaw shouted. “What on Etheria is wrong with you, woman? You can’t just go around threatening...” Like the elves standing nervously around the table, his words were cut short by a seething glare from his barmaid.

“By wearing fake armor and carrying a name they have not earned, these elves dishonor the Elite and penance must be paid.” One of the few people that knew better than to interfere in matters of honor, Grimshaw gave her a slight nod of his head. Turning her attention back to the four elves, she expertly flipped the knife in her hand as they quickly stripped out of their armor.

Several minutes later, butt naked and completely humiliated, the four elves walked out of the Water Sprite with a hot-headed barmaid following after. Leading them to the eastern gate by the longest possible route, she made sure everyone out at such a late hour not only saw them, but knew what they had done to deserve the embarrassment.

“You can’t just toss us out of the city without clothes,” one of the naked elves protested.

“Sure I can. Now get out of my city before I do something you’ll all regret,” Valarria said with the tip of the knife pointed between his legs. They scattered like roaches in the light and when they were finally out of sight she turned to see Thoban standing several feet away wearing an amused grin.

“Did you really have to make them strip completely naked?”

“Nope, but it’s the least they deserve for dishonoring the Elite. So, how pissed is Grimshaw?”

Reaching into his tunic, Thoban withdrew a small leather pouch jingling with coin.

“Pretty pissed. He understands your right for honor, but...”

“I’m fired,” Valarria sighed. “No matter. It was about time for me to move on anyways.”

“He asked that I give you this.”

“Keep it. So, since I’ll be leaving the city in a few hours and we’ll probably never see each other again how would you like to fulfill your wildest fantasy?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Thoban said as he tucked the pouch back into his tunic.

“You may keep your hands to yourself, but don’t think for a second I haven’t seen the way you watch my every move or how you always come to my rescue despite knowing I am more than capable of taking care of myself. Walk me home and I’m all yours, big guy.”

“As enticing an offer as that is, I don’t want to hurt you, Valarria, so I think I’ll pass.”

Knowing beneath the intimidating figure lay a gently giant, Valarria grinned. “We both know you couldn’t hurt me if you tried so come on, let’s go have some fun.”