

The Guardswoman

Tales of Ethshar

by Lawrence Watt-Evans, 1954–

Published: 1995



Dear Mother,

Well, I made it. I'm a soldier in the City Guard of Ethshar of the Sands, in the service of the overlord, Ederd IV.

It wasn't easy!

Getting here wasn't really any trouble. I know you were worried about bandits and...well, and other problems on the highway, but I didn't see any. The people I *did* see didn't bother me at all, unless you count a rude remark one caravan driver made about my size.

He apologized nicely after I stuffed him head-first into a barrel of salted fish.

After that everything went just fine, right up until I reached the city gates. I asked one of the guards about joining up, and *he* made a rude remark, but I couldn't stuff *him* into a fish barrel—for one thing, he had a sword, and I didn't, and he had friends around, and I didn't, and there weren't any barrels right nearby anyway. So I just smiled sweetly and repeated my question, and he sent me to a lieutenant in the north middle tower...

I should explain, I guess. Grandgate is very complicated—it's actually three gates, one after another, with towers on both sides of each gate, so there are six gate-towers, three on the north and three on the south. And each of those towers is connected by a wall to a really *big* tower, and then the city wall itself starts on the other side of each of the *big* towers, which are the North Barracks and the South Barracks. Everything right along the highway, out to the width of the outer gate, which is the widest one, is part of Grandgate Market, and everyone just walks right through if they want to and if the guards don't decide they shouldn't. Everything between the inner towers and the barracks towers, though, is sort of private territory for us guards—that's where we train, and march, and so on.

Anyway, the gateman sent me to a lieutenant in the north middle tower, and *he* sent me to Captain Dabran in the North Barracks, and he sent me back to another lieutenant, Lieutenant Gerath, in the north outer tower, to see whether I could qualify.

I had to do all kinds of things to show I was strong and fast enough—most women aren't, after all, so I guess it was fair. I had a foot-race with a man named Lador, and then after I beat him I had to catch him and throw him over a fence-rail, and then I had to pick up this fellow named Talden who's just about the fattest man you ever saw, Mother, I mean he's even fatter than Parl the Smith, and throw *him* over the fence-rail. I tried to find nice soft mud for them to land in, but I'm not sure if they appreciated it. The lieutenant did, though.

And then I had to climb a rope to the top of the tower, and throw a spear, and on and on.

The worst part was the swordsmanship test. Mother, no one in the village knows how to use a sword properly, not the way these people do! Lieutenant Gerath says I'll need to really work on using a sword. That prompted some rude remarks from the other soldiers about women knowing what to do with swords, only they didn't mean *sword* swords, of course, but they all shut up when I glared at them and then looked meaningfully at the fence rail and the mud.

By the time I finished all the tests, though, a whole crowd had gathered to watch, and they were laughing and cheering—I never *saw* so many people! There were more people there than there are in our entire village!

And I was exhausted, too—but Lieutenant Gerath was really impressed, and he vouched for me to Captain Dabran, and here I am! I'm a soldier! They've given me my yellow tunic and everything.

I don't have a red skirt yet, though—all they had on hand were kilts, and of course I want to wear something decent, not walk around with my legs bare. It must be cold in the winter, going around like that.

Anyway, they didn't have any proper skirts; they're going to give me the fabric and let me make my own. And they didn't have any breastplates that fit—

naturally, one that was meant for a man isn't going to fit *me*. I'm not shaped like that. The armorer is working on making me one.

I asked why they didn't have any for women, and everyone kind of looked embarrassed, so I kept asking, and...

Well, Mother, you know we've always heard that the City Guard is open to anyone over sixteen who can handle the job, man or woman, and everyone here swears that's true, so I asked how many women there are in the Guard right now, and everyone got even *more* embarrassed, but finally Captain Dabran answered me.

One.

Me.

There have been others in the past, though not for several years, and they wouldn't mind more in the future, but right now, there's just me.

I guess it's a great honor, but I wonder whether it might get a bit *lonely*. It's going to be hard to fit in.

I mean, right now, I'm writing this while sitting alone in the North Barracks. I have my own room here, since I'm the only woman in the Guard, but even if I didn't, I'd be alone. Everyone else who's off duty went out. I asked where they were going, you know, hinting that I'd like to come along, but when I found out where they were going I decided I'd stay here and write this letter.

They're going down to the part of the city called Soldiertown, where all the tradespeople who supply the Guard are. I've been down there—to Tavern Street, and Sword Street, and Armorer Street, and Gambler Street.

Except tonight, they're all going to Whore Street.

Somehow I figured it would be better if I didn't go along.

Well, I guess that's about everything I had to say. I'm a soldier now, and I'm fine, and I hope everything's fine back home. Say hello to Thira and Kara for me.

Your loving daughter,
Shennar

Dear Mother,

I'm sorry I haven't written sooner, but I've been pretty busy. The work isn't all that hard, but we don't get much time off.

Well, I *could* have written sooner, but...

Well, anyway, I'm writing *now*.

Everything's fine here. I got my uniform completed—the armorer had a lot of trouble with the breastplate, but he got it right eventually. Or almost right; it's still a bit snug.

I've been here for two months now, and mostly it's been fine. I don't mind standing guard at the gate, or walking the top of the wall, or patrolling the market, and so far I haven't had to arrest anyone or break up any fights. Not any *real* fights, anyway—nothing where picking someone up and throwing him away didn't solve the problem.

And my time off-duty has been all right; most of the men treat me well, though they're a lot rougher than I'm used to. I don't mind that; I can be rough right back without worrying about hurting anyone.

But I'm not sure I'm really fitting in. I mean, everyone's nice to me, and they all say they like having me here, but I don't really feel like I'm part of the company yet, if you know what I mean. I'm still the new kid.

And it doesn't help any that once every sixnight, all the men in my barracks hall go down to Whore Street, and the whole place is empty, and I can't go along.

The first time they did that I just sat here and wrote to you, and then tidied up the place, and kept busy like that, but the second time I was determined to *do* something.

So I tried going downstairs to one of the other barracks halls—I'm on the fourth floor of the North Barracks—but I didn't know anybody there, and they were all busy with their regular off-duty stuff. The only way I could see to get in on anything would be to join the game of three-bone going on in the corner, and I'm not very good at dice, so I didn't.

Then I tried going into the city, but I went in uniform, and the minute I walked into a tavern everyone shut up and stared at me. That wasn't very comfortable.

I thought maybe they'd get over it, so I bought an ale and sat down at an empty table and waited for someone to come over and join me, but no one did.

It wasn't much fun.

When I finished my ale I came back here and sat around being utterly miserable. I felt completely left out; it was as bad as when the village kids wouldn't play with me because I was so big and strong. I didn't exactly cry myself to sleep, but I sniffled a little.

The next day all my barracksmates were back, laughing and joking and feeling good. I made some remarks, and Kelder Arl's son said, "Well, Shennar, at some of the houses there are boys for rent, too." And everyone laughed.

I didn't think it was very funny, myself. And I certainly didn't take it seriously. I don't understand why the men all go to the brothels, anyway—they're mostly decent people, and could find women elsewhere. Some of them *have* women elsewhere, but they go to Whore Street anyway.

Men are strange.

But it did get me thinking that what I needed was some nice young man I could visit every sixnight. It wouldn't really do to bed with one of my fellow soldiers; I wouldn't feel right about that. Besides, most of them aren't *that* nice. I wanted a civilian.

So I started looking for one. I wore my civilian clothes and went to the most respectable inns and shops and tried to act like a lady.

Honestly, Mother, you'd think that in a city this size, it wouldn't be hard to find a good man, but I certainly didn't manage it. For sixnight after sixnight I looked, and I found plenty of drunkards and foul-smelling wretches, and big stupid oxen, and men who might have been all right if they weren't so small I was afraid that I'd break them in half if I ever hugged them.

And, well, I gave up, and here I am writing this letter while the men are at the brothels again.

What *is* it that makes them so eager to spend all their money there?

Mother, you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to seal this up for the messenger, and then I'm going to go down to Whore Street and *ask* someone. Not

one of my barracksmates, but someone who works there. I'll just *ask* why the men all go there every sixnight.

Maybe if I can figure *that* out, it'll give me some idea what I should do!

Love,

Shennar

Dear Mother,

I met the most wonderful man! And you'll never guess where.

I'd gone down to Whore Street, the way I told you I was planning to, and at first I just walked up and down the street—it's only seven blocks long—just looking at the brothels and listening to the people. But after awhile that wasn't getting me anywhere, so I got up my nerve and went up to one of the doors and knocked.

This woman who wasn't wearing anything but a chiffon skirt and a feather in her hair answered, and took one look at me, and said, "I'm sorry, but you must have the wrong place." And she tried to shut the door.

Well, I wasn't going to give up that easily; I was afraid that I'd never be able to get up the nerve to try again if I once backed down. So I put my foot in the door and pushed back.

I tried to tell her I just wanted to talk to someone, but she wasn't listening; instead she was calling, "Tabar! Tabar, quick!"

I pushed in through the door and I tried to catch her by the arm, since she wasn't wearing any tunic I could grab, but I couldn't get a solid hold, and then this voice deep as distant thunder said, "Is there a problem?"

And I looked up—really *up*, Mother! And there was this face looking down at me with the most spectacular mustache and big dark eyes.

"She wouldn't let me in," I said, and I let the woman go. She ran off and left me face to face with this *huge* man—we'd have been nose to nose if he hadn't been so tall.

"We don't accept women as customers here," he said. "You could try Beautiful Phera's Place, two doors down."

"I'm not a customer," I told him.

"If you have a complaint you can tell *me*," he said. "Though I don't promise we'll do anything about it."

"It's not a complaint, exactly," I said, "but I'd like to talk to you."

He nodded, and led the way to a little room off to one side.

And while we were walking there I got a good look at two things.

One was the front room. It was amazing. Silk and velvet everywhere, and beads, and colored glass, all in reds and pinks and yellows.

And the other was the man I was talking to. Mother, he was taller than Father! And *much* broader. I'd never seen anyone *close* to that size before! He had lovely long black hair, and these long fingers, and that *wonderful* mustache. He was wearing a black velvet tunic worked with gold, and a black kilt, and he moved like a giant *cat*, Mother, it was just gorgeous.

Anyway, we went into this little room, which was very small, and pretty ordinary, with a little table and a couple of chairs, and we sat down, and he looked at me, didn't say anything.

I couldn't help asking, "Why aren't you in the *Guard*?"

He smiled at me. "You must be new around here," he said. "Think about it. A guardsman—or guardswoman—has to be big and strong enough to stop a fight, preferably before it starts. You've probably seen a guardsman stop trouble just by standing up and frowning, or by walking in the door and shouting—guards hardly ever have to draw their swords."

"I've done it myself," I admitted.

"Well," he said, "this is Soldiertown. Most of the customers here are guardsmen. If *they* start trouble, Rudhira wants to have someone around who can stop guardsmen the way guardsmen stop ordinary tavern brawls. So she hired me."

He wasn't bragging, Mother. He turned up a palm, you know what I mean. He was just stating a fact.

"But wouldn't you rather be in the Guard?" I asked.

He looked at me as if I had gone mad, then laughed.

"Rudhira pays better," he said. "And there are extras."

"Oh," I said, and then I realized what the extras probably were, and I blushed and said, "Oh," again.

"Some houses use magicians to handle trouble," he said conversationally. "After all, we all need to have the magicians in sometimes to make sure nobody catches anything, and some of the girls want magic to be sure they don't get pregnant, so why not use them to keep things peaceful? But if a customer's drunk enough he might not notice a magician right away, and magic takes time, and can go wrong—and besides, I cost more than a guardsman, but not as much as a wizard! So Rudhira keeps my brother and me around, and we make sure everything stays quiet and friendly and no one gets rough." He leaned back, and asked, "So why are you here?"

So I explained about how all my barracksmates would disappear every sixnight, and how tired I was of being left with nothing to do, and I asked why they all came *here*, instead of finding themselves women...I mean, finding women who aren't professionals.

"Oh, it's all part of showing off to each other that they're real men," Tabar said. "They all come here because they can do it *together*, and show how loyal they all are to each other. The more stuff they do together, the more they trust each other when there's trouble."

I had to think about that for awhile, but eventually I decided he was right. If one of the men went off with his own woman, he wouldn't be as much a part of the company.

But of course, that meant that *I* wasn't as much a part of the company.

I'd sort of noticed that, as I guess I told you, but I thought it was just because I was new, and not from the city, and of course partly because I was the only woman. I tried to fit in, and I did everything that everyone else did back at the barracks, all the jokes and games and arm-wrestling and so on, and mostly it was okay, but I could feel that I wasn't *really* accepted yet, and I thought it was just going to be a matter of time—but when Tabar explained that I realized that it wasn't just that. The expeditions down to Whore Street were part of fitting in, and I wasn't doing it.

I *couldn't*, unless I wanted to go to someplace like Beautiful Phera's, which I didn't, and besides, none of my company went to places like that—they all liked women, or at least pretended to when they went to Whore Street, and the specialty places charged extra.

Even before I asked Tabar about it, I knew that didn't really make any difference that I couldn't.

Anyway, I got talking to Tabar about it all, and we talked and talked, and by the time I headed back to the barracks it was just about midnight.

And the next sixnight, when the men were getting ready to go, I had an idea. I said, "Hey, wait for me!" and I went along with them.

Some of them were kind of nervous about it; I could see that in the way they looked at me, and they weren't as noisy as usual. One man—you don't know him, but his name's Kelder Arl's son—asked where I thought I was going, and I said, "Rudhira's." And everyone laughed.

"You like women?" someone asked, and someone else said, "Or are you trying to pick up a few extra silvers?" And I didn't get mad or anything, I just laughed and said no.

I didn't get mad because I knew Tabar would be there.

As soon as we set foot in the door I called, "Tabar!" And there he was, and he stopped dead in his tracks when he saw me, and this big grin spread all over his face.

"Shennar," he said, "what are *you* doing here?"

"The boys and I are just here for our regular fun," I said, and everyone laughed, and we had a fine time. I talked to some of the girls, and joked with the men, and then when the men went upstairs Tabar and I went back to his room...

He's wonderful, Mother. If you ever come down to visit you'll have to meet him.

Love,
Shennar

Dear Mother,

What's wrong with a whorehouse bouncer? It's honest work.

Mother, I'm not a delicate little flower. I'm a hundred and eighty pounds of bone and muscle. And Tabar is two hundred and fifty pounds of bone and muscle. I like him.

And seeing him has really helped. I'm fitting in better than ever. I love my job, Mother, and going to Whore Street every sixnight is helping me with it.

Besides, I like Tabar a *lot*, Mother. And it's not as if it costs me anything, the way it does everyone else. Tabar and I joke sometimes about which of us should be charging.

The only thing is...

Well, it looks as if Tabar and I will be married, at least for awhile. We hadn't really planned on it, but it's happened. The lieutenant says I can get leave when I need it, and I've been saving up what the men use as brothel money so I won't starve while I'm on leave, but I'm not sure how it's going to go over with the rest of the company having a baby around here.

I think they'll get used to it. But it's driving the armorer crazy enlarging my breastplate every sixnight or so!

Love,
Shennar

