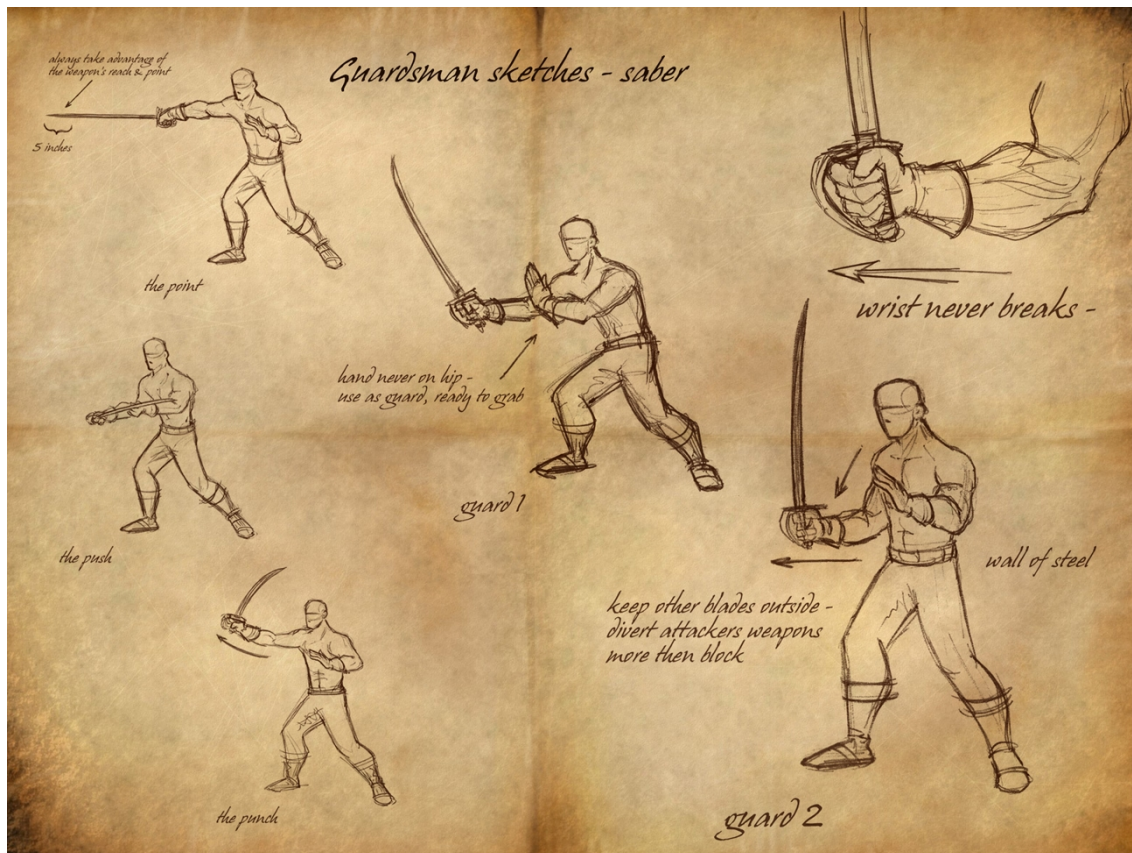


Observations on Guardsmen

The Sword

My Lord, it pains me to admit my belief – our men cannot stand against the Imperial Guard even at four to one odds. Perhaps House Ishi, with their Sorcery of the Mind, could make their soldiers stand, but our men will break like the tide against our cliffs. There simply is no concern for survival in these men and their skill level is unmatched. My apologies, Lord. You have no wish to hear my feeble rantings. I shall return to my task.

Again this morning I focused on those guardsmen at work with the style of sword used in the Sea of Grass. My notes:



These men do not wear their scabbard once the sword is drawn. Those with wooden scabbards instead use it as a parrying tool and light club in their off-hand. It repeatedly proves an effective distraction for their opponent.

The blade itself seems alive in the hands of these men, an extension of their arm. The wrist is seldom used, instead much motion begins in the elbow or shoulder, particularly when parrying. Feet are almost always shoulder width apart and the weight of the upper body is centered. Even when they thrust the body stays centered on the spread legs – there is no



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hopping, the swordsman's feet rarely leave the ground completely. Full body action is the norm, the swordsman's shoulders, hips and feet are rarely static. The instructors seem to emphasize balance over all else.

An oft-heard yell involves “the wall of steel.” This is their term for defense. In truth, defense seems more of an exercise for specific actions – defending a door or hall, protecting someone, or a delaying tactic. All the scenarios this morning involve defense against multiple foes. All incoming blows are more deflected, diverted than blocked. Always the attacker's blow is redirected just enough to miss its target and no more. Typically, each defensive move is followed by a quick counter-attack. The defender never chases his attacker's weapon, instead limiting himself to the smallest possible motions. The defender's blade is seldom farther from his body than half arm's length.

Guardsmen definitely believe offense to be the best defense. They use all parts of the weapon in a dizzying array of blows. When combatants close, the swordsman will sometimes use the guard of his weapon to punch and the pommel to hammer upon an opponent's head, shoulders and neck. The point is frequently used, taking full advantage of the reach granted by the length of the blade. Sometimes the blade is grasped in two hands, the edge pushed into their opponent. Cuts are commonly used when a swordsman's blade follows his opponent's weapon back to his body in counter-attack or as a first blow.

The swordsman's free hand is never at rest. It is not set upon the hip as so many of the swordmasters of Tar Mira instruct. Instead, the free hand is used to parry weak blows, to strike or grapple their opponent. In one case, a swordsman repeatedly throws objects at his opponent with his free hand – dirt, a cup, a bucket, a cloak, even a chair.

What truly sets these men apart is not just the level of skill; it is the total commitment to their goal. In many of the drills I witnessed this morn, the drill involved something other than simply defeating an opponent: protecting a person or place, slowing multiple attackers, killing one particular target who was herself defended by several armed guards. I was startled during this drill to realize the target of the exercise was the Lady Ruena, younger sister of the Consort. She seemed quite pleased with her role. When the guards around her fell beneath the swordsman's attack, she vigorously, if futilely, defended herself with surprising skill.

In all drills, the guardsman chosen to execute the challenge was truly frightening in his single-minded pursuit of the task.





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excerpt from the notebook of Shar Aronos, discovered in wreckage off the shores of Wardhill



Illustration [Guardsmen Sketches: Saber](#) by Andy Underwood.

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