

# War

Erax assumed the roof guard: he put his back foot slantwise and raised his sword at shoulder level, the blade vertical a bit to the back. He was tired, every inch of his body was aching. He tried to relax but his arms were too tense. His opponent was assuming the fool's guard, the hilt at hip level, the blade pointing to the ground; an invitation to attack only a fool would miss—a trap. *I will go for a scalp strike then.*

Erax attacked.

He stepped forward, extended his arms, and aimed for the head. The other sword moved in a flash, intercepting his own; they bound. Erax decided to be weak, pulsing both blades upward. His opponent smiled then took advantage of their proximity to kick him in the groin. Erax fell back.

“You disappoint me, son,” his father told him while performing a flat strike on his head, *another bruise for the collection.* “Do you think that Orm’og the Great would have fallen for that? Don’t stay static and don’t clench your grip, you’re not a peasant with a pointy stick.”

Erax sneered but quickly regretted it as it opened a dry wound on his upper lip. It was impossible to please his father, Count Grovethrive, the best swordshand on this side of the Mountain.

The *old man* looked at the sky. “The sun hasn’t finished its first loop. We still have time before your departure to the University. Again!” He assumed the fool's guard.

Erax repositioned his feet and assumed the roof guard. He calmed his breath to focus. *Expire... I go for a middle-cut. Inspire... He intercept it; we bind and he plays it strong. Hold. I play it weak while doing a switch step. Expire... And I finish him with a cross strike. Inspire...*

Erax attacked.

He swung his sword in diagonale while taking a step forward. His father's blade moved like the wind and bound with his sword. *He's weak, he wants me to commit to the winding to best me afterward.* Erax rotated his sword until his guard struck the other blade, then he extended his arm to pulse both weapons to the side, he performed a step-pivot, finished at his father's side and elbowed him in the jaw.

"Not bad son," his father said, spitting some blood on the ground. "It's been a long time since I had felt such invigorating pain. A fighter could come out of you if he doesn't die suffocated under a bunch of books."

Some warmth appeared in Erax's body; he had learned to savor a praise from his father.

He heard horseshoes on the stone and turned. A rider, in blatant red and silver, was galloping toward them. He was wearing the royal tabard: the silver City before the sunset. His father had already composed itself and was walking toward the newcomer.

Erax wanted to hear the news but he was too tired; he stayed here, controlling his breath. In less than ten inspirations, his father had dismissed the rider and was walking back to him.

"The king has summoned me to the City," he told him.

"What does he want?"

"If he summons me, it only means one thing—war."