

Chapter 1

ABIEL'S ACADEMY

The upswing of the sword seemed effortless, but it was terrifyingly swift. Frantically, and only just in time, the heavy shield swung across, nudging the blow away so that the speeding blade passed harmlessly through air instead of tearing through flesh and sinew.

Smoothly the young attacker took advantage of his older opponent's unbalanced movement; a small turn of his supple wrist and the sword was now raised, angled to begin another lightning attack.

Fear made the defender's movements ungainly as he jumped desperately back.

“Enough, Ben-hail! Enough!”

The King's Armour-bearer

Ben-hail smiled suddenly and quickly lowered the point of his glittering sword until it touched the ground. It was as if his companion had interrupted some harmless teenage sport, not the deadly game of swordsmanship played out with naked blades.

“Sorry, Abiel,” he said, breathing hard. “I was concentrating.”

“You certainly weren’t taking any hints,” said Abiel. His voice shook a little, and his chest was heaving.

“I’ve been trying to speed up my attacks, sir. You told me that if you hurry your adversary they’re more likely to make mistakes.”

“I suppose I did. But I didn’t expect you to use it against me!”

“I was trying as hard as I could against you because it’s safe – you’re so much better than I am with a sword that I know you’ll never be in any danger, even if I get everything right at the same time.”

“Ah, I see,” said Abiel thoughtfully. It was true that he was a master of swordsmanship, and that he always encouraged his students to try their hardest against him. The fear he had felt in the last few moments was unprecedented. Ben-hail was growing up fast, he thought ruefully, and showed an astonishing aptitude for sword-fighting.

“Did you like my last upper thrust, Abiel? I tried to make it as powerful as possible without putting myself in danger of losing my balance when you parried it.”

“It was very well directed, Ben-hail, and your transition was faster than anything you’ve used against me before.” In truth, it was faster than anything he had ever seen before from *anyone*, either in training or in battle.

“Thanks, Abiel. It felt good. But I wasn’t so happy with my defence earlier. It felt too slow. Do you have any other suggestions as to how I can speed up more?”

The older man wiped his hand across his brow and shook his head slowly. At first, he couldn’t remember any moment in their bout in which Ben-hail had moved with anything less than frightening speed. For the first time, Abiel realised that if he had to fight to the death with his protégé, he would have no hope of victory. Putting the thought out of his mind, he tried to relax and think back over every move Ben-hail had made; to assess the bout impartially. He had to acknowledge that all of the young man’s moves had been the actions of a master, yet even so, with the removal of the threat of that naked blade, Abiel’s expert eye could discern room for improvement. For a moment he struggled to overcome his pride, then took a deep breath and offered the advice that would surely enable his pupil to further outstrip him in swordsmanship.

Ben-hail listened carefully to the expert advice, then applied the new ideas as the two of them faced each other

again. He was a quick learner, and after half-an-hour of practice, the new arts had been explored, mastered and seamlessly added to his already breathtaking array of skills.

As they continued to fence, Abiel was on his guard, doing his best to prevent Ben-hail from slipping into that state of complete concentration where all his movements became as smooth and swift as those of a striking snake. It was not easy; for with Ben-hail, that concentration was his normal state of being when handling a sword.

The training bout finally finished after a testing hour, and Abiel was glad to have it done. The session had been an eye-opener to him. After just two years of training, this stripling had clearly eclipsed his teacher. Yet Abiel was not just *any* teacher: he was acknowledged as the best fighter with sword and shield in all Judah. It was tempting for him to suggest to himself that age was catching up with him, but he knew that it wasn't true. It was not his own greater age that made his opponent so difficult to fight: it was that Ben-hail had an easy freedom of movement that made even the most complex of athletic manoeuvres seem simple. What was more, the athleticism was blended with an efficiency that made his every move achieve twice as much as it would with anybody else. With newly-opened eyes, Abiel had seen the truth: Ben-hail made him look – and feel – old and awkward.

Abiel sent Ben-hail away to join the roster of students preparing the evening meal, and immediately called his second-best student, Beker, from a nearby practice area.

Abiel wanted to test his skills; he needed to prove to himself that he wasn't too old to fight.

For the next half-hour, Beker fought valiantly, using all of his considerable skill in both defence and attack, but Abiel was like a circling hornet, always out of reach until he attacked with delicate precision and lightning speed. His opponent looked lost in the face of the onslaught, and a trickle of blood on his arm showed where Abiel had effortlessly threaded his sword through Beker's defence and gleefully touched his arm. Were it not for Abiel's great skill in stopping the thrust, Beker would have been badly injured, but even so, the instructor was not pleased with himself – he had allowed his self-satisfaction to overcome his professionalism.

The session went well for Abiel and he felt much better at the end of it. His technical skill had not been challenged and his ability to predict exactly what his student would do next had carried him through without danger. He could almost excuse the pinking of his student in the joy of knowing that his skill had not deserted him.

His work finished for the day, he walked away from the practice area, pleased, but marvelling more than ever at the consummate skill of his master student.

With a sword in his hand, Ben-hail was certainly something to marvel at.

