

**THE FLAME DRAGON KNIGHT**

**炎龍騎士**



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“Say it.”

“We need a plan in order to fight the tiger. Please give us until tonight.”

Abecassis thought a little, then nodded stiffly. “Very well. We will save your fight against the tiger until nightfall.”

“We appreciate it, sir.”

Grunbeld asked Edvard quietly, “Plan?”

It didn’t seem like a plan would make any difference against that monster, but Edvard was full of confidence. “Leave it to me. It’s my area of expertise.”

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Night arrived, and the training site became an arena. Torches had been arranged above the enclosing walls for the sake of illuminating the center. Pieces of resin-rich pine had been chopped up and stuffed into iron baskets, and they gave off black smoke as they burned.

Stands had been hastily prepared in a location overlooking the entire arena. Sitting there was, of course, General Abecassis. Together with his adjutant and guard soldiers, he was drinking liquor and impatiently awaiting the start of the match.



The other children had been permitted to watch. They could see the center of the arena through the iron bars in the windows of the passageway connecting the training site with the jail tower.

Then, urged on by guards, the trio of Grunbeld, Edvard, and Sigur entered. The door that would otherwise provide retreat was bolted shut, and in front of them stood the tiger cage. Grunbeld and the others had been given wooden training swords.

"You probably have no chance of winning with those weapons alone," said Abecassis from above. "I also had a weapon placed down there that could perhaps kill that tiger."

Beside the cage was indeed the weapon Abecassis had mentioned. The adjutant looked at it and said, "You're not very kind, General," as he smiled in amusement. The weapon in question was a huge war hammer. It was about four feet long, with a massive iron head that was flat on one end with the other tapered to a sharp point. The hammer was nothing an adult could wield, much less a child.

Abecassis' intent was obvious. He wanted to see their faces twisted with despair, unable to lift a weapon that was too heavy. But there was no sport in making the children fight a tiger barehanded. Even if a hope was false, people would cling to it when pushed far enough. Abecassis was looking forward to that moment.

Who had made this war hammer in the first place was a mystery. It had been a decoration in a run-down temple the Tudor forces had happened across. Simply lifting it was one thing, but there was no way anyone would ever be able to wield the hammer as a weapon, so it was most likely originally created as a work of art or as a votive offering.

Sigur was trembling slightly. Edvard felt like his knees were about to give out. Only Grunbeld was fully composed.

"Aren't you scared?" marveled Edvard.

"Nah," said Grunbeld. "I have a feeling we won't lose. You've got a plan."

"Yeah."

"Even if we *do* lose," continued Grunbeld, "it's far better to be eaten by that tiger than killed by Abecassis or one of his men."

Edvard and Sigur exchanged a glance then laughed in spite of themselves. "It's far better to be eaten by a tiger, huh? You got that right," said Sigur. The two of them had stopped trembling.

"Now, while we have time." Edvard briefly explained his plan to Grunbeld and Sigur.

"Begin," announced Abecassis, and a Tudor bowman pulled the trigger on a large crossbow. The loosed bolt broke the

padlock on the cage door. There was a metallic clank, and the monster tiger realized the door would now open. The beast growled as it slowly exited the cage.

“Sigur! Grunbeld!” Edvard signaled by calling out their names. Grunbeld immediately moved next to a wall, and Sigur climbed up on his shoulders. After receiving this boost, Sigur jumped up and reached for one of the torches arranged above the wall. Her fingertips hooked on the leg of the basket, and the burning wood fell into the arena.

Abecassis opened his eyes wide. Now he finally understood the reason Edvard has suggested doing this at night. Edvard must have already been thinking that the only option was to utilize fire.

Only the ends of the wood pieces were burning, so it was possible to hold them like torches. But the pieces had grown hot all over, so Edvard and Sigur used the rags they wore to wrap tightly around their hands for protection. As Sigur’s clothes were now wrapped around her hand, her white skin and breasts were exposed. Vulgar shouts came from the Tudor soldiers, but the trio fighting for their lives didn’t hear them at all.

Grunbeld didn’t carry a torch—he was wielding the heavy torch basket itself as a weapon! Large and made of iron and with the end split into prongs, the basket gave Grunbeld a far better chance than a wooden sword against the tiger.





*Bright red flames will burn your enemies, and hard scales will break blades.*

The conversion education prisoners watching from the passageway raised their voices: "Fight hard, don't lose!"

"We're going to die as heroes!"

"Show us your courage, Grunbeld! Edvard! Sigur!"

"That's the end of my plan," said Edvard.

Grunbeld flashed a smile. His comrades' cheers pleased him. "It's good enough."

The tiger was so large that one's sense of distance was thrown off. What's more, the beast was dreadfully quick at closing a gap. Just when the tiger seemed to be plodding about, taking a good look at what the humans were doing, it sprung in close in an instant. According to the humans' senses, the tiger seemed to have just grown even larger.

Edvard and Sigur held out their torches to keep the tiger in check. The animal's instincts were to dislike fire. When the tiger's advance slowed as a result, Grunbeld thrust the torch basket at it. The top of the basket had contained fire, so it was red hot. When that touched the tiger's skin, there was a sizzling sound and a burning stench filled the arena.

Grunbeld had hoped this would make the tiger lose the will to fight. That wouldn't have been odd with a typical wild