

## **The soldiers from over the hill by Ruggero Degl' Innocenti**

BOOM! And the castle walls crumbled.

Seven hours before ...

I have confidence in my protectors. I know they will keep me safe, but I can't help but be preoccupied by the great catapults, and the battering rams I see in the distance.

Oh, by the way, my name is Keep and I'm a castle - about to be attacked. I am a modest, basic castle, with four tall, thick walls, four mighty towers which loom over a small hill, a high vantage point and a great gated keep. Burning braziers decorated with scenes of battle were always alight and never turned off.

The knights showed up at dawn today surrounding me completely, but focused especially on my gate. I couldn't help but be worried, and I could sense the tension of the soldiers and archers and the lord ready to defend me. Even the horses in their stables down in the courtyard, close to the gate, were skittish.

Suddenly, the piercing shriek of a horn cut through the morning mist, and birds of all kind flew from the trees and the river close to the north wall. For a moment, there was silence, and then a battle cry burst from the enemy, which charged in a massive wave of death.

The archers fired volley after volley of fiery arrows cutting down the warriors in front, but the enemy archers were returning fire as well and many archers were shot down.

During the midst of the battle, a small pigeon was able to take off from the aviary in the courtyard and fly past the enemy lines, heading south towards allied castles. Help was on its way but would it arrive soon enough?

As the warriors closed in the catapults started firing deadly volleys of fire and stone. Most landed short, wounding their own warriors, but some projectiles managed to shake the walls and weaken the towers. The first jolts of pain coursed through my walls, and I could feel there was no escape from my destruction. All around me, all I could see was a seething mass of charging soldiers, and I was sure that unless those reinforcements arrived soon, I would be turned into crumbling ruins. I was doomed to live my last miserable hours thinking of how I was going to be torn down, pillaged, pulverised, annihilated! I was panicking, thinking of the state I would be left in - my walls reduced to rubble, my square towers just a pile of broken stones. The knights inside the castle walls were shaking in their armour as a huge battering ram slowly moved towards the gates. In a few minutes all would be lost.

Suddenly, one of the flag bearers lowered the enemy flag, which could only mean one thing: their lord was dead, shot by an arrow. With no-one to lead them, their army retreated to the hills where they set up camp.

As the hours passed, the wounded were cared for, and everyone was set to his or her precise task - restocking the towers with arrows, putting boiling oil on the walls, and setting some neat piles of stones to throw at the enemy. Barricades were made inside my walls, especially at the gatehouse. I was especially proud of my gatehouse: its walls were double thickness, so nothing could pass

through. There was a mighty gate made with massive tree trunks, reinforced with iron bars and slates. I had no drawbridge, because sadly, I had no moat (which would have been a great advantage - I was not confident my portcullis would stop an army). The gatehouse stood many metres tall, and mighty murder holes were waiting, with swarms of people readying stones and boiling hot oil and water. Further up in the tower, archers were readying their bows, and some braziers were lit to burn the arrows. Every woman and child hid in the castle dungeons. But I knew this calm wouldn't last long, and I prayed as the hours passed, that the reinforcements would arrive as soon as possible, because the enemy army was getting in to ranks, this time everything pointing towards our gates.

Our small defences did not stand a chance against what was coming to us. Not a sound escaped the archers and all the warriors had a grim look of determination on their faces, as a deep horn bellowed across a valley that seemed to be frozen in time.

And suddenly everything burst into chaos. The enemy army, fit with a new banner, charged into the midst of the valley, an unstoppable wave of bloodthirsty murderers, looking for blood.

The archers fired frantically, not aiming at one in particular, but the army simply could not be stopped. And then I remembered one simple, incredibly stupid error we had committed. The great battering ram, a giant construction of wood and iron, was right in front of the portcullis. Everyone screamed in horror, realising their fatal mistake, but it was too late. The enemy army had already reached the battering ram and with a couple of crunches then a sickening BOOM, my gatehouse crumbled. But it was worse. The walls began to crumble, with the weak square tower ripping apart easily. Soon, almost half of my walls were destroyed. My mind slipped into darkness.

As I woke from my deathly slumber, a strange sight bestowed me. The enemy was retreating! At first, I thought that it was a miracle sent by God, then I realised I was right. A great army, dressed in shining armour, was chasing the enemy on horseback. I was saved!

After our allies had defeated the assailants, they helped with my reparation. My walls were reinforced and I became twice as strong thanks to the strength and courage of the ones that sacrificed their lives to protect me. They added not one, but two moats. The first was dug outside the whole structure and the other within the inner walls. They made an extra set! My towers were larger and more robust than before, cylindrical to withstand the mightiest attack. My old braziers were relit and others were made. And if that wasn't enough, they made two gatehouses for the outer wall, on a steep, man-made road. No battering ram could ever go up it. I could now live the rest of my life in peace until I was no longer needed...