

Sir Bradford's Ordeal, Part 1

On the eastern frontier of a kingdom sat a peaceful village where people worked and lived under the watch of a strong castle. Sir Bradford was the knight in charge of the castle. He was a wise and quiet man who liked to take his time to listen, observe, and learn before he acted or spoke. The king of the realm had noted these traits when he chose Sir Bradford to keep watch over this remote part of his kingdom.

It was a great responsibility that had been entrusted to Sir Bradford to be in charge of keeping the peace in this area of the kingdom. Sir Bradford knew very well that the peace and security enjoyed by the land's inhabitants was due to much more than what his castle and armed soldiers provided. What made the lives of the people the most secure was the guarantee of support and protection from the king of the realm, who lived far away in the kingdom's bustling capital city.

One day a woman arrived at the castle with some urgent news for Sir Bradford and his counselors that tested the trust that Sir Bradford and his people placed in their king.

Her name was Mabel. For many years she lived alone in the forested pass that went through the mountains on the kingdom's border not far from the village. The villagers called her the "wise woman of the woods."



"I have seen armed men skulking through the forest, moving toward my home," she announced to Sir Bradford. "At first I thought they were just a few brigands and I went out to surprise them. But then I saw many more men further down, moving along the banks of the creek. They were wearing armor and carrying banners, and I realized the first men I saw were the advance scouts of a much larger army that is coming through the pass!"

Sir Bradford pondered what he had heard, and then asked question after question of the frightened woman, trying to uncover further details that might help him in his decision of what to do next.

"That is all I observed, my lord," answered Mabel. "After I spotted the army, I immediately made my way here. The enemy scouts almost stopped me, but I got through them and came here as fast as I could."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Sir Bradford. "You have done a great service to us all."



Then Sir Bradford turned to the castle's sergeant and senior soldier. "Milford, sound the recall alarm and keep on sounding it. I want you to send the men out to make sure that everyone in the village, in the fields, and in the forest, wherever they are, gets into the castle before this hour is over."

At the top of the castle's highest tower, Milford put his lips to the recall horn that was only used for such emergencies and blew a loud, deep blast. After each horn blow, he beat out a steady rhythm on a drum that sent sharp notes across the countryside.

"An enemy is approaching. Bring only what you can carry, and come into the castle grounds!" the soldiers shouted as they went through the village and its surrounding lands.

Within minutes, men, women, and children were streaming from the village and countryside toward Sir Bradford's castle, carrying bundles of clothes, bedding, and food.



While the evacuation into the castle grounds was in progress, Sir Bradford sent out a messenger on horseback with a letter to the king.

Dear King,

We have been surprised by an invasion from enemy forces that is approaching through the mountains. All of your people are taking refuge within the castle, but we fear we will soon be besieged. We ask for your immediate help to deliver us from this danger.

*Loyally yours,
Sir Bradford, on behalf of your devoted subjects.*

As the messenger rode out of the gate, a cheer went up from the people, "Hurray! Long live the king!"

Soon, after the last of the village inhabitants crossed over the castle moat's drawbridge, the enemy soldiers came into sight.

"Now drop the portcullis and raise the drawbridge!" commanded Sir Bradford, as the advancing enemy column came rushing down the road.

A very angry man from the enemy ranks came huffing and puffing up to the edge of the castle's water-filled moat. Immediately he started shouting for Sir Bradford by name.

Sir Bradford emerged at the top of the castle's keep and immediately recognized a man he had not seen for twenty years. It was Merek, who was known throughout the kingdom as the "rogue prince." Years ago he had left the kingdom in anger after the king chose not to promote him to a position of lordship over some of his lands. When Merek left, he had vowed to someday come back for revenge.

"Merek, I haven't seen you in years," Sir Bradford called out to the man below. "What on earth are you doing here?"

"I've come to claim what is rightfully mine," the rogue prince replied impatiently. "Lay down your arms! Your people will be far better off if you quickly surrender your lands to me without any further protest."

"We have no need to be afraid of you," Sir Bradford replied. "A message has been sent to the king asking for his help. No doubt he will arrive shortly with his powerful army, so I suggest you take your men and go back the way you came."

The rogue prince was not deterred and replied angrily, "If you do not surrender, I will destroy your village, destroy all your lands and make you and your people my slaves!"



Within the castle, Sir Bradford explained the situation to the people. "The rouge prince is a dangerous man and I'm afraid he just wants to do whatever damage he can to the kingdom in revenge for not getting his way all those years ago. Surrendering to him is not a choice we can make. We must trust that our king will come with an army to rescue us."

"I'm sure you must be right," said one of the head men of the village, "but if the king doesn't hurry, the invaders will ruin our lands and homes! They'll cut down our trees, and kill our animals. There is no telling what they'll do as long as they're staying around here."

Mabel, the wise woman of the woods, who had given the first warning of the enemy army, spoke up. "We can't let ourselves be so easily frightened. Let us think for a moment on why we put our trust in the king. We did it for a good reason, didn't we? So let's allow time for the king to do what he will do, and not be hasty to replace our trust with fear."



The castle was now surrounded by the rogue prince's army, making it impossible for another messenger to be sent out, at least no human messenger. So the next message Sir Bradford wrote left the castle tied to a pigeon's leg.

Dear King,

The enemy has surrounded our castle, but thankfully all of your people are safely inside.

The invading army is led by Merek, the rogue prince. He says that he has come to take over this part of your kingdom and has demanded our surrender.

We are currently safe within our strong castle walls, and have strategically stationed archers and watchers. Though we are safe for the time, we are worried about what the enemy might do to our lands, and we wonder how long we can hold out.

The king received the letter with great interest. His subjects were telling him the details of the trouble they were facing, and even their fears. They were telling him because they were depending on him for a solution.

With this information, the king could craft a plan that would turn the tide of events to their favor.

But the king's plan would take time, and during that time, inside the castle, the people didn't know what the king was doing, and some began to let their fears get the best of them.

"No, you fools!" Sir Bradford exclaimed. "There are too many of them. You'll only get yourselves killed."

It was the middle of the night, and Sir Bradford had just come upon Sergeant Milford with a group of soldiers preparing to sally¹ out in a raid against the enemy.

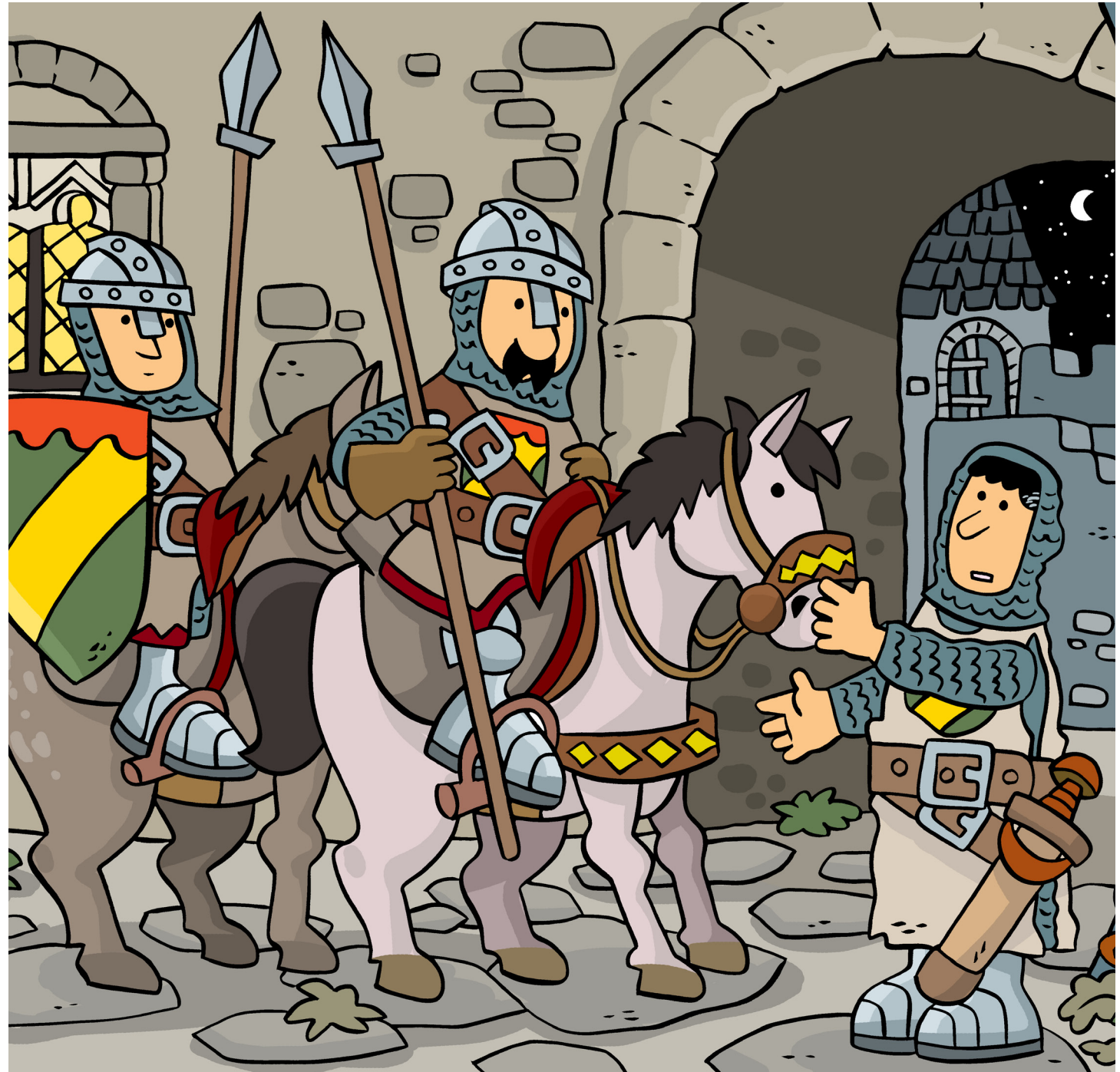
"We've asked the king to rescue us," said Sir Bradford. "We must have faith and await his arrival. There's no other way for us to get out of this mess if we want to make it out alive."

"And what if the king doesn't rescue us?" asked Milford. "How will you explain that to the people?"

Though that particular crisis was avoided, Sir Bradford now could see that the situation was even more difficult, and that his own soldiers could possibly turn against him if the king didn't arrive soon.

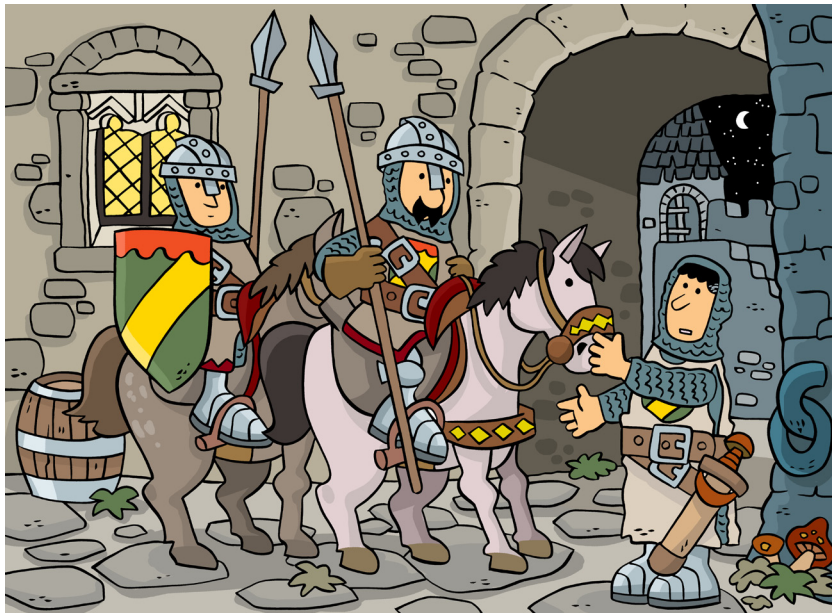
(To be continued.)

1. sally: to rush out or leap forth suddenly ("sally:" The Free Dictionary)



Sir Bradford's Ordeal, Part 2

The story so far: A village and castle situated in a remote corner of the kingdom came under attack by Merek, the rogue prince. Sir Bradford, the castle lord, sent a message to their king, asking for help. When help didn't arrive quickly, the people became anxious, and some tried to take matters into their own hands.



The very next day, nearly a week after the villagers had taken refuge in the castle, the king arrived with his powerful army.

But even if Merek, the rogue prince, was impressed, he tried his best not to show it.

"It took you long enough to come," Merek told the king as the two met face to face to parley.¹

"You have no business being here," replied the king, angry at his enemy's insolence. "This is part of my kingdom, and I am here to protect my people. You are not wanted here."

1. parley: to discuss, especially with an enemy ("parley." The Free Dictionary)



"Make me leave then!" shouted the rogue prince. "I am not afraid of a fight! Come. Let us see who this corner of the kingdom really belongs to."

The people in the castle watching the exchange from the walls and towers gasped at the rogue prince's rudeness.

"The king has been challenged, and now he must act!" declared Sergeant Milford.

"You were right all along, Sir Bradford," said Milford. "It was foolish of me to think we could act without the help of the king."

The citizens eagerly watched throughout the day, anticipating the defeat of the rogue prince's army.

But the king did something both confusing and unexpected. Rather than attack the invaders, the king and his army stayed right where they were, camped in their position overlooking the castle and the rogue prince's army.





Days went by, and Prince Merek's messages grew more boastful and haughty. "Look at how your own king fears me! He can see for himself that my army is too strong for him. Stop waiting on your weak king, and surrender yourselves."

Those within the castle grounds grew more anxious by the day. But Sir Bradford commanded everyone to stay put. "The king knows our troubles. He is here now, and he will not abandon us."

Though the king's apparent lack of action did not give much comfort to the refugees in the castle, the king was making no mistake. He had many spies and informants, even among the enemy, who daily gave him new information. And this information told the king that his plan was working.

It was a worrying sight to those watching from the castle when one morning the king's soldiers dismantled their tents and packed their equipment. Then to their shock, the king's army formed columns and marched away.

"What does the king think he's doing?" Sergeant Milford exclaimed angrily. "Is he not strong enough to help us?"

Does he even care?"

"Maybe the king has something he considers more important to do," someone else suggested.

"Perhaps we aren't his priority," another said. "It could be that he has received another urgent request from somewhere else in the kingdom, and has gone to help the others instead."

"In these bad times, the king must be very busy, and we must accept that we are on our own."

"Look! Your king is fleeing!" bragged Prince Merek. "Prepare to surrender. Once I've dealt with the king's army, I'll be back to deal with you." Despite his bravado, the rogue prince and his army didn't budge, but stayed within their fortified camp throughout the rest of the day.

That night, the air was filled with noise and commotion from the rogue prince's encampment. The watchmen on the castle walls looked out anxiously into the night, but little could be seen other than the light from a few torches. Before dawn arrived, all became quiet, much quieter than on any of the previous days.



After waiting and watching for a good part of the morning, Sir Bradford decided to lead a patrol of his soldiers out to investigate. "I'll only take a few of you with me," he explained to his men. "If something goes wrong and we need to move quickly, it will be easier for our small team to make a quick retreat back to the castle grounds."

Sir Bradford was the first to scramble up the rampart and peer into the enemy camp. He was shocked to find the camp had been abandoned, seemingly in a disorderly rush. Noting an armored man wandering through the camp, Sir Bradford snuck up on him and pounced.

"I surrender!" the man yelled.

"What's going on here?" demanded Sir Bradford.

"I ... I ... I don't know! I was sick with fever, and when I woke up this morning, everyone was gone!" the soldier wailed. "They've left me behind!"

"Hold this man while I investigate," Sir Bradford told his men.





The few tents left were empty; the camp was abandoned. With great relief, Sir Bradford led his scouting party back to the castle, where he announced, "It's finished. It appears that the siege is over; the enemy has left our lands."

It wasn't long before the people had left the castle to return to their farms and homes. Things were a mess, especially in the village where many of the enemy soldiers had camped. But there was nothing that couldn't be repaired or replaced, and the materials from the abandoned enemy camp were put to good use.

Sir Bradford knew that, as soon as possible, he would have to make a journey. He needed to talk with the king. For so long, he had stayed strong and loyal, but now after recent events, Sir Bradford had questions that needed to be answered.

So, once the people were out of the castle and had begun work repairing their homes, Sir Bradford left the castle in charge of Sergeant Milford and sped off on his horse toward the kingdom's capital city.

When Sir Bradford arrived, he was told by a steward to wait in the palace garden and that the king would see him there.

The palace garden was a beautiful place. Fruit trees, rose bushes, pools and fountains all called out for the attention of any who entered that place of beauty. But Sir Bradford hadn't had much time to examine his surroundings when the king entered through a small gate.

"Sir Bradford!" exclaimed the king, walking swiftly forward. "It's so good to see you."

"That was quite an awful ordeal with the rogue prince, wasn't it? I always knew he'd come back one day," the king said with a faraway look in his eyes, "but that doesn't make this any easier. I'm just glad your messages got to me quickly, so that I was able to put things into action to free your lands as soon as possible. I do hope that your people there are recovering from their ordeal."

Sir Bradford looked down at his feet.

"What do you want to say, my friend?" asked the king. "Tell me what you're thinking. There's no need to hesitate."



"Well, my lord, you talk as if you rescued us," said Sir Bradford. "But from the way it seemed to us, well, it seems you did nothing. You left us there, hiding in the castle grounds, until fortunately the rogue prince finally just up and left on his own."

"Oh, Sir Bradford!" the king said with a voice full of sympathy that sounded on the verge of tears. "I'm deeply sorry for everything that you and your people went through. It was a terrible thing that happened, to see your lives and homes in such danger."

"But you must know that I have been true to my word. Often I do things in ways that my people do not understand, and I am not always able to reveal to them my reasons."





"But in this case, I think you will understand once I explain. You are my faithful servant, and I know you will use this knowledge to inspire others to trust in my judgment for how I chose to do things.

"It took time for me to gather my forces. Many of my knights and soldiers were away defending other parts of the land, and it took time for them to answer my call to assemble and march with me.

"Then, as you know, we marched toward your lands and set ourselves up in full view of the rogue prince and his army.

"The rogue prince was well-prepared for a fight right where he was, entrenched in your

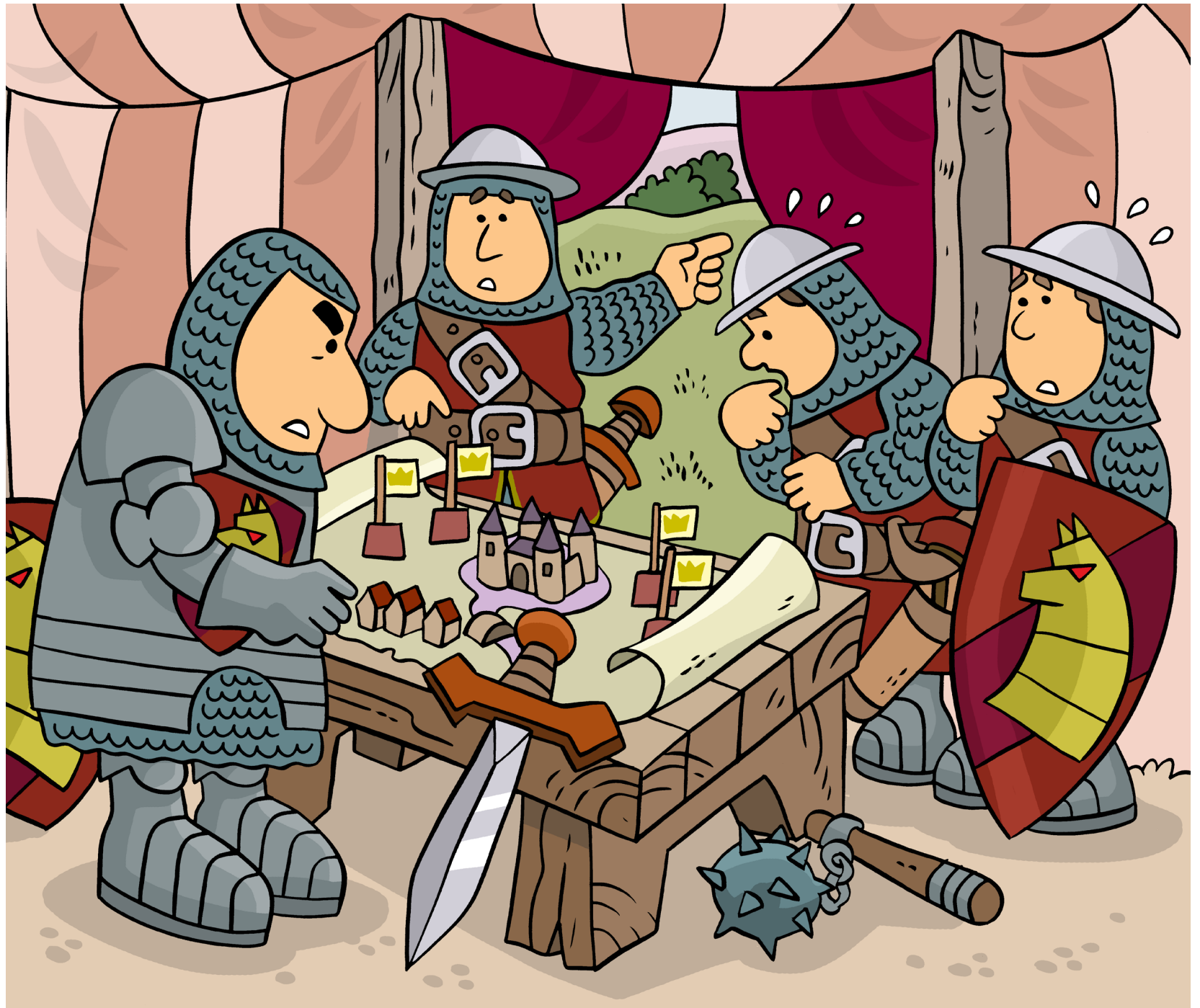
lands surrounding the castle, and if I had attacked immediately we could have defeated the enemy, but it would have been a long and hard fight over the fortifications the rogue prince had built. You might have been stuck in your castle for weeks to come, while your lands would have suffered great destruction in the process.

"However, by holding my forces back, I did not give the enemy the kind of battle that he was hoping for, a battle where Merek thought that his strong, well-prepared position would give him an advantage. He knew that my army was prepared, and he saw that I would not fight him on his own terms but was preparing to fight him in the open.



"Now, I learned over the days, from my network of informers, that the rogue prince and his men were not brave enough to face my strong footmen and swift knights on open ground. They were not about to budge from the safety of their fortified positions as long as my army was nearby. So as soon as I moved my army away, and gave Merak the chance to make a safe retreat, he eagerly took it.

"In time, Sir Bradford, your people will learn that the things they entrust to me will always work out for the better. Some learn this lesson quickly, while for others it is a process that lasts a lifetime. But my people will always be my people, and even when they doubt me, I will continue to answer their requests."



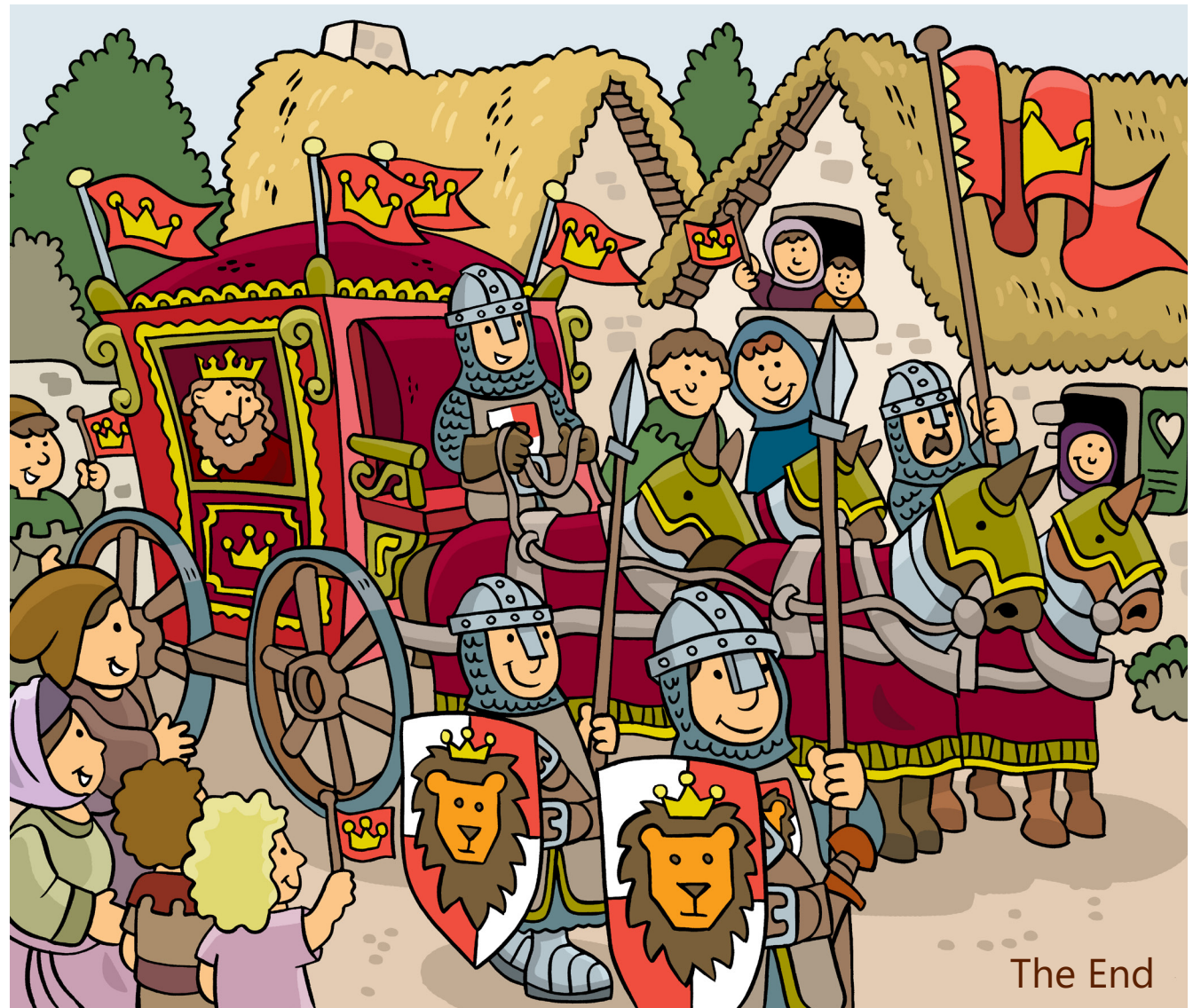
Many months later, the people were informed of an upcoming visit from the king. The mood was festive as the people prepared for their royal visitor. On the day the king arrived, flags hung from house windows and streamers fluttered in the trees. Children squealed in delight at seeing the king so close.

The king smiled and waved as his carriage rolled slowly through the village and into the square. He gave a special knowing smile to the wise woman, Mabel, who blushed and bowed graciously in return.

One man rushed toward the carriage and fell on his knees, it was Milford, the castle sergeant. "My lord!" he exclaimed, "I know that we owe you our safety and well-being. I am sorry that I doubted you, and I am ashamed to confess that I even spoke against your actions to others while we were besieged."

The king climbed out of his carriage and lifted Milford off the ground in a grand hug. "All is forgiven," the king said. "You requested my help and your land was saved, that is what matters. Rest assured, my friend, that even when you doubt me, I am still your faithful and devoted king."

And so the story ends. Though some of the people continued to grumble over the king's actions, most came to accept that the king had done what was best for them and their land. And no matter what the people thought, the king always kept watch over his beloved people.



The End