

The night had been pitch dark and was now turning the red and grey of just before dawn. The sun had not yet risen, but its early red streaks could be seen making patterns in the distant sky. Owls still hooted, and foxes and badgers and other creatures of the night moved through the forest, heading home before the daylight exposed them to predators of their own.

We stayed silent, hidden behind trees and concealed beneath bushes, watching as the first light of day filtered through the trees. Across the track, throughout the forest, others were also hidden. More warriors from our tribe. Our spies had been keeping an eye on the Romans in their big fort and had noticed that they sent out dawn patrols to keep watch on the territory they had invaded. For the past two days the Roman patrol had travelled the same path, coming through this part of the forest. Usually it was just a party of twenty soldiers and we had fifty of our tribe hidden among the trees and bushes of the wood. All of us were armed with knives, swords, axes and spears.

In the distance, we heard the sound of many tramping feet. The Roman patrol was coming! I crouched behind the cover of the trees my fist gripping the handle of my knife so tightly I thought my knuckles would lock. Beside me, my cousin was holding his large axe. The others were also poised, their weapons at the ready.

Nearer and nearer came the sound of the Roman patrol, marching feet crashing down onto the earth. Then, through the leaves and branches, I saw them: a glint of the early sun catching on the metal armour the soldiers wore. Now I could see the faces of the soldiers beneath their helmets. How was it they could not see us? We were so close to them! The soldiers at the front of the patrol began to pass us. I felt a sickness in my stomach. This would be my first battle against the Romans. Would I be brave enough?