

OCTOBER - A.D. 9

The rain fell hard upon Publius Quinctilius Varus and his remaining men. They were exhausted and hungry, but they had to keep moving at any cost. They had to reach an open space where they could dig in and fight.

With the rain and the onset of night, the Romans could no longer see their pursuers. But they could hear them. Oh, yes. They could hear them. A sound to chill the Gods themselves.

“Use the last of the pitch to light torches, Tribune,” Varus commanded. The man obeyed without a word and within minutes a ring of fire encircled the shield wall that protected the legate, his few remaining officers, and three broken centuries.

How is it possible? Varus wondered. Three centuries left of my three legions...

Varus removed his helmet with the broken crest and looked up at the three golden aquilae of his savaged legions. Firelight played on the golden breasts of those symbols of Rome’s might. The commander thought they still looked proud, strong.

His men were anything but.

For three days they had been harried through the Teutoburg forest, that Germanic Hades. The legions had been ambushed over and over and over... from all sides, at all hours. For days, all Varus had heard were the cries of his men in the black, gnarled woods.

The nights were the worst.

That sound... an incessant howling that tore into one’s person as efficiently as any gladius. Varus closed his eyes in the face of the sputtering rain-slapped torches and tried to imagine his villa at Baiae, the scent of jasmine, the heat of the sun.

But all he felt was the cold, and the wet. All he heard was the terrifying sound of ripping flesh, and the harsh breaking of bones like dried twigs.

“Commander!” The tribune came up beside Varus. “They’re forming up for a charge, sir!”

“So they are, Tribune.” Varus opened his eyes and looked at the surrounding tree lines where black shapes cursed in ugly guttural intonations, spears, scythes, and clubs waving madly at the Romans.

“What shall we do, Commander?” the tribune pressed.

“We shall die, Tribune. Like all the rest.”

The tribune shook his head in frustration and moved past Varus. “Form up! Prepare to receive attack!” he ordered as he placed his helmet on his head and hefted a pilum.

Varus hears the insubordination in the tribune’s voice but thinks only of the eagles and the rain upon his face. He no longer thinks of Arminius and how the man had betrayed him, and Rome. He cares little for the civilians he had abandoned to the Germans once the attacks had begun.

When the pained, tormented, and raging howls of the enemy begin anew, Quinctilius Varus thinks only of the ancestral gladius at his side. When the barbarians’ visages begin to transform, when the teeth begin to gnash and rip through Roman shields, armour, and bone, then does Varus draw his sword and plant the handle in the deep mud.

As the beasts rush in, huge and dark and matted with gore, Varus watches his men crumple on all sides. The body of Varus’ last tribune flies over his head as he drops on

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his old knees and places the tip of his blade beneath the rim of his ornate cuirass.

Varus falls on his sword, even as Arminius struts up to him and hacks the head from his body without hesitation.

The hunt comes to a violent end as the moon cuts through the clouds and shines upon the field.

It is full, and bright, and all at once, several thousand of the enemy begin to bay at its light.