

The Battle of Idistaviso – 16 AD

The Chieftain, Arminius stood alone on the upper slope of the hill overlooking the Weser. The sun had risen to its zenith. The heat caused all to be still. A brief flash of reflected sunlight caught his attention. Roman armour, Arminius thought and above his gaunt cheeks his eyes narrowed.

The forest to his back was a dense tangle of seasonal undergrowth and ancient limbs. From its depths came the murmur of a multitude, as if the spirits of the forest were speaking as one. But these were mortal men, gathered together in defiance, men of the Marsi, the Chatti, the Bructeri, the Angrivarii, and at their heart, the warriors of Arminius's own tribe, the Cherusci.

It was a fragile alliance. The Roman legions that had advanced across the Rhine months before were only attacking those tribes directly in their path. The enemy campaign was one of terror, not conquest, but Arminius had persuaded the other tribal leaders that the Romans threatened them all in equal measure. This army was only the tip of the sword. It had to be destroyed, like the legions in the Teutoburg, or Germania would soon be consumed by the avarice of Rome.

One tribe had already betrayed them, the Chauci. They had forsaken their ancestors and taken up arms on the side of the enemy. As auxiliary troops, they had guided the Roman legions across Germania, revealing every pass and ford to speed their advance. Arminius cursed them from the depths of his heart. Their example had weakened the alliance and Arminius vowed that should the immortal Wodan grant

them victory in the battle to come, the fate of the Chauci would forever deter other tribes from forming an alliance with the Romans.

A warrior approached. It was Inviomerus, Arminius' uncle and his second-in-command. The older man was restless and he pointed his war club at the lower valley.

'Another day is passing,' he said, a hard edge to his voice.

'This day is not yet over,' Arminius replied warily. 'They may yet come,'

'They must come soon or all will be lost,' Inviomerus said

Arminius turned to look at his uncle. Inviomerus had many skills, and chief amongst them was an uncanny ability to judge the mood of the men. Whether spoken aloud or not, Inviomerus knew their thoughts. He had already warned Arminius that his decision to assemble the tribes on one place was a risky gamble. Old rivalries would easily ignite in such close quarters and the longer they waited the more likely it was that the alliance would collapse.

'You still believe this is the only way?' Inviomerus asked.

'They cross the Rhine, and we fall back,' Arminius said through gritted teeth. 'They burn our towns and massacre our families, and we fall back. They desecrate our sacred land, and still we fall back. Sooner or later we must stand. I say it is here.'

'We cannot fight the Romans alone, we need the strength of the other tribes and they will not remain here for much longer.'

'Our allies follow because they believe we are strong. If we withdraw now, before battle has been joined, then they will desert us. Then we truly will be alone.'

'How can you be sure the Romans will attack? Perhaps our position is too strong, even for their arrogance.'

'I know this enemy,' Arminius spat. 'They will attack.'

Inviomerus nodded. Despite his concerns as to the stability of the alliance, his faith in his nephew was absolute. As a young man Arminius had been a hostage of the Romans. He had lived in Rome and had even trained as a Roman officer. If any German knew the Roman mind it was Arminius.

‘Riders,’ Arminius indicated. A troop was galloping up the slope of the hill, their voices raised in an effort to push their mounts to greater speed. They reigned in before the two commanders.

‘The enemy, my chief,’ the leader gasped. ‘They advance.’

‘In train?’

‘No, in battle array.’

‘To where?’

‘To here, my chief.’

Arminius slammed a fist into his open palm.

‘Inviomerus, deploy our skirmishers and alert the cavalry to take their position.’

‘It will be done,’ Inviomerus said, a savage smile on his face.

‘Return to the valley floor,’ Arminius ordered the scouts. ‘Shadow the Roman deployment and report back.’ The horsemen wheeled their mounts around and tore down the hill.

Arminius looked towards the enemy positions. Coming from behind the hill that had hidden their camps, the legions would remain out of sight until they reached the valley floor.

But they were coming.

Arminius turned his back and walked towards the forest. The murmur of before began to rise into a clamour of voices, the sound of men eager for battle. Arminius allowed

the noise to feed his blood lust. He quickened his stride and pushed through the undergrowth, ready to take command of the tribes of Germania.

From the looming hill Titus Duilius Varus, senatorial commander of the XXI Rapax legion, heard a muted cheer, a discordant cry that ebbed and flowed, like the stoking of a great fire. The four legions of the army of General Germanicus marched in silence but the valley was filled with the sounds of their march; the tramp of *caligae* boots, the jangle of loose kit and the occasional bark of an officer's voice as he dressed the lines. Varus rode at the head of his legion in the marching column, his elevated position on horseback giving him the opportunity to study the approach terrain in detail.

The river Weser was to their left. In the dead heat its slow moving surface shimmered with shards of reflected sunlight. The hill the barbarians had chosen stood away from the riverbank but the strip of flat land between the two was sufficiently narrow to offer some protection to the legions' flank. To the right, the tree-topped hills further back would hinder any attempt by cavalry to sweep behind the advancing army. The enemy stronghold rose before them. The tree line along the summit was almost a mile across and as Varus studied its length another cheer erupted from the forest interior.

Varus looked to his men. The enemy war-cries seemed to have no effect on them and their eyes remained firmly fixed on the line of their march. Once deployed, XXI Rapax would command the right flank, V Alaudae and I Germanica would take the centre, and XX Valeria Victrix would command the left. The II Augusta was to be held in reserve but would also act as a line of contravallation should the Germans try

to outflank the army and attack from the base of the slope. The XIII Gemina Pia Fidelis had been given the luckless task of guarding the marching camps and train.

The mixed *alae* units of cavalry and skirmishers had been detached from each legion and had been placed under a single command to guard the flanks. Amongst them were the warriors of the Chauci. They were fine allies and had proved themselves invaluable on the march eastward.

Not for the first time Varus marvelled at the stubborn resistance of the other tribes of Germania. It was a phenomenon he had also known in Dalmatia and Pannonia. Varus understood that people desired to be their own masters but there was no indignity in submitting to Rome. The Empire offered protection, peace, the rule of law, and the opportunity to be part of a greater civilisation. To live in savage isolation, as these people wanted, was contrary to all logic.

As the legions neared the hill Varus allowed the rhythmic noise of the march to steady his nerve. He whispered a prayer to Mercury, the house God of the Duilius clan, to watch over his wife, Prisca, and his two young sons, should he fall in battle. He hadn't seen them in over two years and although he could vividly remember the beauty of his wife, he could no longer summon a clear image of his sons in his mind's eye. The realization surprised him but before he could dwell on it his thoughts were lost to a series of shouted commands.

Riders raced down the length of the marching column, calling out the order to deploy. With a nod from Varus the *praefectus castrorum*, Gaius Octavius, echoed the command to the XXI. The former chief centurion, third-in-command of the legion, was a veteran of twenty-five years and the centurions responded instantly to his order. The legion deployed with practiced discipline into a line of attack.

Varus called the *tribunus laticlavius*, Marcus Cornelius Milo, to his side. He was young man, a newly elected senator who had been sent to the frontier to gain military experience. Varus smiled inwardly as Milo approached. With obvious effort Milo's outward bearing was steady but his eyes betrayed his apprehension. They followed every cry from the forest above them. He reined in before Varus and slammed his fist to his armoured chest.

'*Tribunus*,' Varus ordered. 'Take command of the five *tribuni angusticlavii*. Have one attend each of the other legates and the general. I want regular reports from across the formation.'

Milo slammed his fist on his chest again and was away. Again Varus smiled, this time recalling his own baptism of fire at Artagira more than ten years before and with the tip of his tongue he traced the old scar on the inside of his cheek. In the heat of his first skirmish he had clamped his teeth so tightly in fear that he had bitten off a piece of his own flesh. Even to this day he associated the metallic taste of blood with the terror of that battle.

The XXI moved swiftly into position. From behind his men Varus stared up the hill. The slope was steeper than it had appeared when viewed from a distance and the forest at the summit resembled the walls of a fortress. The advance would be difficult and although the legionaries were experienced Germanicus had ordered the men to deploy in ranks six deep, a slower moving but more rigid formation that would go some way to counteract the disadvantage of fighting up hill.

After the hour long march from the camp the men were sweating heavily under their armour and Varus ordered water bearers to come up. He looked along the length of the battle line. It stretched nearly three thousand yards, twenty thousand men, with a further five thousand in reserve. It was a sight to see and Varus allowed it

to fill his heart. The lines steadied. The centurions stood to the fore, ready to lead.

Varus's mount skittered, sensing the tension that pervaded the air and he patted its flank. He glanced at the soldier standing beside his horse. He held aloft a simple red flag, a marker to signify Varus's position on the battlefield.

'What's your name, soldier?' Varus asked

'Lucius Paullus Accius, Legate.'

'Stay with me, Accius,' Varus said.

The soldier replied with a salute and as the sound of trumpets rippled across the lines the men of the legions began to advance up the hill.

'Hold!' Arminius roared, trying to keep the mass of warriors concealed behind the tree-line in check, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. His voice was drowned by thousands of war cries, the chiefs and tribal veterans whipping their men into a battle frenzy. They hammered their weapons off their shields, a staccato thunder that rumbled throughout the forest, their faces twisted in anger as they cursed the foe who would dare to challenge them.

The archers from each tribe stood alone on the upper slope, loosing volley after volley upon the upturned shields of the Romans. The legions continued to advance steadily, stopping only to re-dress their lines, their discipline striking awe into the younger tribesmen who had never witnessed such battle tactics.

Arminius felt the line surge around him. His warrior's heart yearned for the release. He prayed desperately to Wodan that the first charge could be held until the Romans drew closer. If they attacked too soon and the distance too great, the weight of the charge would dissipate and the strength of the initial strike would be lost. They

had to break the Roman formation. Victory could not be achieved any other way. At the battle of the Teutoburg forest Arminius had seen wave upon wave of men fall before the Roman wall of shields until it was finally breached. Only overwhelming force would break that wall and with the advantage of the downward slope Arminius hoped that the strength of his warriors would be enough.

The legionaries marched on through the hail of arrows. Dozens of men were struck, their cries unheard as the lines of advancing troops stepped over the fallen. Varus looked down at the body of one of his men. The legionary had been struck in his neck, his lifeless hand clasped tightly around the haft in a frozen embrace, his face betraying the final agonizing moments of his life and for a moment Varus's arm trembled with the force of his instinct to turn his horse.

Mounted behind the lines he was an obvious target for the archers and he flinched as an arrow zipped passed his head. He forced himself to sit taller in his saddle, his honour overcoming his fear. He echoed the orders of the junior officers, calling on the men of the XXI to hold firm and he noted with grim satisfaction the steadiness in his own voice.

The soldiers of Rome marched in silence while the war cries of the concealed enemy army reached a deafening crescendo. The distance to the tree line fell to eighty yards. The German archers lowered their bows and loosed their arrows spear-like into the front ranks, enfilading the centurions who stood out from the shield wall. Their bravery touched on madness. The pace of the legionaries increased in anticipation of the order to charge.

Suddenly the air was spilt by a high-pitched shriek. It was instantly followed by the blare of a multitude of battle-horns and with a cry that seemed to emanate from the depths of Hades thousands of warriors erupted from the undergrowth. They tore down the hill, wave upon wave, swinging their weapons wildly aloft in the fury of their charge.

‘Pila!’

The front three ranks raised their spears at the command. The Germans came on, faster and faster down the slope of the hill.

‘Loose!’

Thousands of pila spears were released as one, the legionaries throwing them with all their might, roaring their defiance as they did, letting loose the war cries they had held in check. The spears hung for a moment in the zenith of their arc and then fell, the lead weights behind the spear-tips speeding their downward flight. The Germans rushed into the lethal cascade and were massacred, their upturned shields offering no protection from the heavy spears. War cries became screams of pain and death. The charge buckled for a heartbeat under the onslaught but the Germans came on, their momentum and numbers too great to be checked by any weapon of man.

‘Draw swords!’

The sound of the steel rasp of twenty thousand swords brought another shout of defiance from the legionaries.

The Germans came on. Fifty yards. Forty.

‘Charge!’

The order came at the pinnacle of the legionaries’ battle lust and they shot forward into a full charge within a dozen strides. The two sides met with a tremendous crash. The speed of the German charge overwhelmed the front rank. Without hesitation the

second rank engaged, striking down the tribesmen who had breached the shield wall, sealing any gap with furious aggression. The Germans came on, more and more reaching the line, their numbers adding to the pressure as the leading edge of the battle line descending into butchery.

The Roman line took a step down the hill, the weight of the enemy pushing them back. The third rank of legionaries was engaged. The German ranks were ten deep with more streaming from the undergrowth with every passing second. German archers continued to loose their arrows over the heads of their own men, seeking targets in the rear ranks of the legions. The noise was deafening, the clash of steel and shouts of men in close combat overridden by the war cries of those waiting to engage. At the edge of the forest countless German women screamed encouragement to the warriors of their tribes.

The force of the enemy charge was finally held, and then slowly repulsed. The legionaries pushed up the slope, legs made strong by a lifetime on the march giving them purchase on the blood soaked grass. The lines separated. A gap opened of some ten yards. Missiles rained in from both sides, sporadic strikes that fuelled the tempo of the carnage. The voices of the centurions rung out across the ranks, dressing the lines, preparing the legionaries for the next charge. Like the ebb and flow of a tide the German lines surged and receded, a heaving mass with the bravest warriors standing to the fore, screaming defiance at the Romans, the blood lust of the horde rising anew, their anger slipping beyond the bounds of restraint, every warrior finding new courage.

Almost as one, Roman and German, they charged. The lines clashed for a second time in a hammer blow of steel on steel. Again the legions were forced back. The crush of men at the front brought the battle to a new pitch. The dead and injured fell to be trampled underfoot. Desperate orders were shouted across the Roman lines,

calling on the ranks to stand firm as more ground was lost, the enemy's superior numbers and the incline giving them favour.

The lines separated again, quicker than before as strength and stamina were tested to endurance. Both sides gave ground but this time the legionaries gave more. The space between the armies was littered with the slain. The Roman officers struggled to be heard over the ceaseless tumult. The Germans continued to bait, their war cries becoming a chant as they hammered their shields with the weapons. Wounded legionaries staggered or were dragged back through the ranks before the line compacted into a solid shield wall once more. Now there was no way through and the further pleas of mercy from the wounded were ignored as the order was given to make ready.

‘Charge!’

The legionaries dug deep and ran back up the slope. The Germans came one without a single command, released by the Roman order. The clash was more brutal than before, the men on both sides consumed by the wrath of battle, driven to frenzy as they hacked at each other. The lines buckled and surged, the strength of single men tipping the balance for an instant in one area before he was swallowed by the whole.

In the front ranks the men fought with a fury borne from an inescapable fate. Pushed onwards by their comrades behind there was no choice but to slaughter or be slaughtered. Man against man, sword against sword they fought until they were killed or maimed in their turn.

‘Breech!’

The call of alarm was immediately countered with commands to seal the fracture in the line but another breech opened, and another and another.

‘Fourth Rank, advance and engage.’

The order was acknowledged with a furious counterattack, the men of the fourth rank sealing the breeches and bolstering the men on the battle line. The heave caused the armies to separate, but not as one. Many of the warriors were beyond sanity, their blood lust refusing them leave to withdraw. Isolated, they were quickly cut down. The respite lasted less than a minute before the lines reengaged, the tempo of carnage quickly reaching new heights.

Behind the lines Milo rode up to Varus's side. His youthful face betrayed his anxiety. Varus steadied him with his gaze. In battle hesitation was defeat, fear was death. As officers they had to be above both. Milo drew from his commander's example but still his report tumbled out in a single breath. Only experience kept the surge of apprehension from Varus's face; Germanicus had been forced to order up the reserve legion, the II Augusta.

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For the sixth time the Germans came on. The legions charged to meet them. More ground was lost. The battle had been raging for over an hour. The legions had already fallen back over fifty yards. At the base of the hill, close to the Weser, the auxiliary cavalry were fighting a running battle with the German horse. They were holding the flank, giving the legions leave to fully engage but it was not enough. Only moments before Varus had been compelled to order his final rear ranks, the veteran *triarii*, into the fray. With dread in his heart he could see that even their numbers would not be enough to hold back the German advance.

Then, in the span of a breath, the nature of the battle changed. Varus felt it. Experience sent the signal of alarm to his every sense. Only German war cries could

be heard, the Romans were silent in their desperation to stem the inexorable advance of the enemy. *Optiones* stood behind the line, pushing the men forward with their *hastile* staffs, but too many were stepping back. Varus swept his gaze across the battle. As far as his eye could see he witnessed the same uncertainty. The Roman battle-line was on the brink of collapse.

They could not fail; not the XXI Rapax, not the legions, not Germanicus, and Varus felt a savage determination well up inside of him. He spurred his horse and galloped the short distance to the battle-line. He dismounted and drew his sword, the blade singing from its scabbard in a single sweep. He gathered up a fallen shield. His standard bearer ran to his side. They stepped forward together.

‘XXI Rapax,’ Varus shouted. ‘Steady the line!’

His command was immediately taken up by the officers closest to him. Their legate was amongst them and the line steadied as others saw the red standard, the command gaining momentum as it rippled down the line. Steady the line. Give no more ground.

Varus shoved his way to the front rank. The terrible din of battle; the hammer of steel on shield, the war-cries of men filled his ears. With a fury that possessed his every fibre he punched his shield through the crush, putting it to the fore as he added his strength to the struggle of absorbing the unrelenting weight of the German advance. An enemy warrior hammered down on his shield with his war club, the blow jarring the muscles of his shoulder. Varus stared into the face of the warrior, seeing in his wild eyes the same madness that possessed his every fibre and he roared in defiance.

‘Give ‘em iron!’

He thrust his sword through the gap between his shield and the next. He felt resistance and pushed through before viciously twisting the blade. Warm blood and

viscera flowed over his hand as he buried it to the hilt. The face of the enemy collapsed in grotesque agony, his death cry pushing Varus to greater savagery and he wrenched the blade free.

The men beside Varus took heart from the fury of their commander and they pitched in their last reserves of strength. Varus recovered his blade and bunched himself behind his shield, absorbing the blows of a new enemy, the strikes numbing his arm. He attacked again, striking out with his sword, a thousand hours of training guiding his hand as he struck low, seeking a killing cut to the groin. He found flesh and shoved forward as another warrior fell before him.

‘Men of the XXI,’ he shouted, calling attention. His voice was recognized by his officers over the noise of battle and they repeated his call. Every man in earshot waited for the command to follow.

‘For Tiberius, Germanicus and Rome! Advance!’

The men roared in response and they surged forward as one, deeper into the gaping maw of battle.

The Germans took a step back up the hill. Varus felt the pressure on his shield lessen, a minute change that fed into his determination and he repeated his call to his men, pushing them ever onwards as they gained another step. He squared his shoulders against the attack of another enemy warrior and struck out with his sword. It was roughly parried and he came shield to shield, face to face with his foe. Varus could smell his breath as the barbarian roared his hatred. Varus shifted his weight and stabbed forward. The legionary beside him added his blade and together they struck the man down.

The XXI advanced across its length, the red flag of its legate in the centre. The Germans gave ground and slowly the right flank began to wheel. As before Varus

sensed rather than saw the change in the battle. Now the war cries of the enemy were becoming more sporadic. Many were still fighting with the same fury as before but others were looking over their shoulders with uncertainty and fear. The order to advance was no longer necessary. Every centurion had reassumed the mantel and they urged their men to commit to one final assault.

The advance of the right flank gathered momentum. German warriors streamed away from the rear ranks, fleeing for the tree-line a hundred yards behind. Those who stood their ground were cut down without mercy, the men of the XXI giving the enemy no chance to re-group. The front line of the XXI wheeled through twenty degrees, twenty-five. The Germans in the crook of the line turned to face the threat to their flank. The vice continued to tighten, compressing them until they could neither withdraw nor advance, the fight seemingly on all sides.

The unified attack that had won the Germans so much ground became a shambles of individual fighters as men fell victim to the horror of entrapment. The advance of the XXI slowed, the press of men to their front once more defying their strength and momentum. They solidified their line and then with a brutal rhythm they began to slaughter the thousands of warriors trapped in the elbow between the Roman right flank and the centre.

Varus spat out the metallic taste of blood from his mouth as he tore his sword loose from the clinging flesh of an enemy fighter. His face was splattered with the spray of the fallen, the smell of it filling his nostrils, feeding his battle lust as he sought another target for his blade. A warrior turned to face him and Varus saw the fear in his eyes as the German tried desperately to wield his weapon in the crush of men. Varus stabbed him in the chest, striking three times in quick succession, the German grabbing the blade on the last thrust as if to stay the blows.

The XXI began to roll up the flank, the far right of their front line sweeping around at a faster pace. Varus fought on, his body screaming for respite, his blood lust refusing to relent. They could not stop. They had to reach the depths of the enemy's courage, the breaking point of their spirit. Until then there could be no reprieve.

There could be no quarter, no mercy. The XXI pressed onwards, consuming row upon row of enemy warriors like so many stems of corn before the scythe. Varus stumbled over the injured and the dying, leaving them for the ranks behind. Cries of panic mixed with those of anger and fear, creating a nightmarish cacophony. In the carnage no command was possible or necessary. The legionaries were a rampant inferno, destroying everything in their path.

Suddenly the remnants of the German flank broke and began to flee. Their flight became infectious and sounds of alarm swept across the enemy line. Those who could, ran. For the warriors still in the fight there could be no escape and they died where stood, the brave fighting to the last while others turned away to be cut down from behind.

Varus's command training reasserted itself as the German line collapsed and he pushed back out of the front ranks, away from the butchery. The rear ranks stepped around him and within a moment he was out of the battle line. He stood still for a moment. He dropped his shield and turned his back, stepping over the slain beneath his feet as he sought his mount. His sword felt heavy in his hand and he looked to the blade. It was black with the blood and he tightened his grip on the hilt. Milo galloped up with his horse in tow. The youth dismounted and handed the reins to his commander.

Varus mounted and looked across the battlefield. The legions were advancing on all fronts. On the valley floor the German horse, seeing the rout of their infantry, were fleeing with the auxiliary cavalry in full pursuit.

‘Milo,’ Varus croaked, his mouth as dry as parchment. ‘Find the *praefectus*. Halt the advance at the tree line and regroup the men. The barbarians may yet rediscover their courage.’

‘Yes, my Legate,’ Milo replied.

Varus looked down from the height of his saddle to the standard bearer standing beside him. He was badly bloodied and his armour bore witness to a dozen strikes but he stood tall, his hand firmly grasped around the haft of the flagpole in his hand.

Varus nodded solemnly and handed the soldier his sword, a token for the duty the legionary had shown. Varus took the flagpole, and spurring his horse, he galloped off to take his legion in hand.

Arminius wept with the depth of his fury and shame as men fled passed him. At first he had stood with his arms outstretched in an attempt to stop the rout. He had berating the warriors fleeing towards him, calling on them to take heart and stand their ground, but his entreaties had gone unheard.

From his position behind the centre he had watched the Romans tether on the edge of collapse. The enemy had fed all their reserves into the fray, the end was close and Arminius had ordered every last man into the line in an effort to forge a breach in the centre. Then, inexplicably, his left flank had begun to crumble. He had raced to the point of weakness but with no reserve to commit he could only watch as the flank gave way to a renewed Roman advance.

The end had come swiftly, too fast for any man to reverse. The alliance, so carefully built over months, had collapsed in a matter of minutes. Now it was every tribe for themselves. Only the swiftest, the most ruthless would escape. The Roman cavalry were already sweeping around to the reverse side of the hill. Those fleeing would have to run the gauntlet of their wrath and Arminius feared for the huge train that accompanied the army, the women and children who would be captured and enslaved.

Arminius turned as the last of the German warriors still in the fight, the bravest and noblest, fell before the advancing line of Roman steel. He pushed through the undergrowth, his heart consumed by a vile feeling of shame. All around him the forest echoed with screams of terror. It was the sound of a people condemned to a terrible fate.