

Thusnelda in Exile

by Konrad Aniol

A sample of the opening pages

Thusnelda's Preface

Dear Theophillus,

I, Thusnelda, princess of the Cheruskans and wife of Erminaz am compelled to give a true account of my life, my beloved spouse and our son Thumelaz. It is an injustice that so great a man as Erminaz should have his exploits distorted through the writings of the Romans. He is the liberator of our lands east of the Rhine. Had the Cheruskans been honorable men, instead of traitors, Erminaz would have succeeded in uniting the tribes, instead of being poisoned by our own relatives!

I first met Erminaz when he returned from service with Tiberius as a Roman knight. Erminaz, however, never forgot where his true home lay. Taken as a boy with his brother, Flavus the traitor, to live among the Romans, when he returned home he gave a clear picture differentiating the purity of our customs compared to the debaucheries of Rome. He discarded his Roman military uniform and put on again the cloaks of our people. He was a tall man strikingly good looking, with eyes as blue as the cleanest sky. His golden hair again grew long and a beard once again graced his chiseled masculine face.

I loved him deeply and over the objections of my father Segestes and other relatives we wed. We vowed fidelity to each other no matter how Fate directed our lives. Unlike some of the leading ladies in Rome, my allegiance to my husband did not waver with the changing fortunes. Thus, I have lived as a widow during my captivity. Not even the best of the Romans could compare to Erminaz and induce me to a second marriage!

His commanding presence and powerful words drew many of the Germani to join him in the wars of liberation. However, not all the Germani, including Segestes, could escape from the mesmerizing power of Rome. When I was taken captive during my pregnancy with Thusermin it was my own father and traitors in my village who informed Germanicus of our location. My father hated Erminaz for he wanted me to wed a different prince of the Marti, also a lackey of Rome. I chose a man instead of a puppet. When Erminaz brought me to a safe shelter from the war being waged by Germanicus he also brought my father with other traitors to the same village to be kept under guard. Unfortunately, Erminaz left a rash impulsive cheruscan warrior to oversee the protection of the village. Had he left the two young cheruscan warriors, named Erland and Ariogaz, the future would have been dramatically altered. When I first met these two

lieutenants of Erminaz I was uneasy about the shorter man, Erland. He looked completely alien to me. But Erminaz trusted him and Erland's mastery of our tongue and unquestioned devotion to my husband allayed my concerns. Erland was among the most intelligent men I have met. I am certain he would not have fallen for Germanicus's clever ruse. But Erminaz believed the location of the village was secure and he needed these two lieutenants to be close to him.

If I had not been captured I would have been with Erminaz after the birth of our son. I understood completely the treachery that our relatives are capable of committing and exposed their plot. Erminaz would not have been murdered and he would have succeeded in uniting the tribes and forged a great empire. I would have become queen of this vast territory. Thus Erminaz would succeed his father eventually and the Cherusci would have a real king, instead of Italicus, the Roman puppet and son of the traitor Flavius.

My story would not be complete without including the accounts of my two faithful servants, Blandina and Aram. They were my companions in exile. How they came to be attached to me and the horrible deaths they endured will be revealed by my faithful scribe. I can not claim I understand their motivations, but maybe more reflection on their lives will enlighten me. I can assert that they are among the few honorable and naturally noble persons I have met in my long life.

Chapter 1 - Thusnelda

Dawn, 14 AD

The Lippe River, December

She watched with rising excitement as the sun crested the snow-covered crowns of the pine trees in the surrounding forest. Sunlight coursing through ice crystals produced a court of conifers bedecked in brilliant tiaras swaying as if in a dance to the northern wind's singing in their branches. The sun, at such a low angle, turned the Lippe into a glittering ribbon of gold. The gray-skirted clouds hugging the eastern horizon glowed with a bright red fringe. The scene was enchanting, as if there were any real need to make her even more sensitive to the unfolding day. The Princess called to her maid.

"Dragonfly, Bring me another cloak. This morning mist chills me."

Thusnelda, princess of the Cherusci and betrothed to Erminaz, waited in trembling expectation. It was not merely the cold northern wind of Germania skirting across her bare arms, which caused the goose bumps and quivering in her being. Her beloved, Erminaz, prince of the Cherusci and Liberator of Germania was expected to arrive early this day. The long awaited completion of nuptials would end today and her blessed marriage to him would be sealed with the consummation to follow under the clean, starry December sky that would grace the heavens this night. Her bright blue eyes, shone with joyful expectation as she turned to her servant with arms out to receive the cloak. The Princess was beautiful by anyone's criteria. Pale skin

complemented her long braided blond hair and her blue eyes seemed to have captured a piece of a cloudless sky. Her features were finely defined hinting at a subtle air of power, but they still carried the quintessential aura of feminine beauty. She was tall, regal and strongly built, as was typical of her tribe. Blandina, her young maid in waiting, carried the deer skin cloak to the princess, darting and weaving her way around the dwelling so as to approach the princess with her left profile presented to Thusnelda. The maiden, seven years younger than her mistress had come from Gaul some 6 years earlier to enter into the service of Thusnelda. Blandina, or Dragonfly as she was affectionately known by the Princess, clearly had some inheritance from the Celtic tribes who once lived in the Rhone valley before they were driven out by the tribes pushing westward across the Rhine river. She was a small woman, almost one could say weak. Her dark hair was in striking contrast to her mistress's. With her green eyes she had an inherent beauty but across the cheek of her right face from the jaw to her ear was a marked scar. As a young girl she had stumbled into an open fire and damaged her face. The cicatrice from this injury was so prominent that the eyes of anyone meeting her for the first time would invariably be drawn to the deformity on her right cheek. Even for those persons who were familiar with her the eyes inevitably were drawn to this disfigurement. The physical damage also produced an inner damage in the young woman. She was excessively timid, even for a servant. It was nearly impossible to get her to tend the fire for she feared the flames, which still evoked the horrible accident of her youth. So the fire in the Princess's lodging was flickering and near extinction. It was only with stern but gentle words that Thusnelda could keep her maid on task of feeding the fire.

"We shall have a grand feast tonight with the arrival of your husband my Lady. The entire village is in jubilant expectation of the arrival of Erminaz," said Blandina, as she handed the princess the cloak.

The maid's comment would have seemingly been commonplace and not carrying much information if the circumstances of the nuptials had been different.

"In happier times this would be universally true," responded Thusnelda.

Among Thusnelda's relatives there was a mixed sentiment about the impending arrival of Erminaz and the formal conclusion of the Princess's lengthy betrothal. Sadly, to Thusnelda and her maid, there was a bitter antagonistic relationship between her father, Segestes, and her new husband. In fact, had it not been for the intercession of Thusnelda, these two men would have just as happily killed one another. The rupture between the daughter and the father was centered on their diametrically opposed views of the proper relationship between the Romans and the Cherusci. Thusnelda had been won over to her husband's camp by his stirring words and decisive actions. His campaign against the Roman occupation of Germania had succeeded six years earlier in destroying Rome's stranglehold east of the Rhine. After this battle, for several years, he had been totally occupied with the attempt to keep the Germani organized to face the inevitable revenge of Rome. This revenge was now upon them with the death of Augustus and

the ascension of Tiberius as emperor. Even now Erminaz was successfully blocking Germanicus's recent attempts to reestablish Roman authority over Germania. The battles had been bloody but inconclusive. War was raging again east of the Rhine but there was no clear victor thus far. The onset of winter and the retirement of the antagonists to winter quarters allowed Erminaz to come to Thusnelda and wed his betrothed.

Segestes, on the other hand, was greatly enamored of Rome's rule and counted himself as a friend of Rome. He noted that under the rule of the Roman governor there had been far less intertribal warfare. Men could bring their grievances to the Governor or his magistrates for a resolution of their disputes. Violence was then no longer the prerogatives of the sundry tribes since Rome, like all governments, claimed exclusive right to act in violence. Roman engineers knitted the various parts of the country together with real roads instead of the muddy dirt tracks, which the Germani used. Imposing buildings were erected, towns began to be established and the new economy created by Roman rule afforded the inhabitants other avenues to occupy their time rather than endless internecine warfare.

Thusnelda granted that there were certain benefits of rule by Rome, but the cost to Germani pride and freedom was too high for these advantages. The Princess had listened to Erminaz's carefully crafted speeches to form a united Germani effort to expel the foreign occupiers. His enumeration of the many real injuries and insults the Germani had suffered under the occupation won over followers from many of the tribes. Her adherence to Erminaz caused the great rift between daughter and father. Their relationship had been corrupted from the natural affection between parent and child and had declined into a state of alienation.

They were now forced to live in the same village because Segestes and his supporters were prisoners of Erminaz and were under guard in the same village as Thusnelda was kept. Daughter and father could equally well have been exiled to separate countries. The intimate affection for each other that Segestes and his daughter had once enjoyed was over shadowed by the hostilities their choices created.

This poisoned relationship had not always existed. Seven years earlier Segestes had grand designs to wed Thusnelda to Erminaz. As a youth Erminaz had been raised in Rome and was even a member of the minor Roman nobility. The Cheruscan princes, Erminaz and Flavus, had been sent to live in Rome as a token of peace by their father. Erminaz, when he reached manhood, had campaigned honorably with the great Roman general Tiberius. In Segestes's estimation union between his daughter and this Latinized Cheruscan prince would cement Germani-Roman relations and enhance his authority among the tribes.

It was a great horror for Segestes to learn that Erminaz was the central figure in an intrigue designed to bring a decisive end to Roman rule in Germania. Segestes had exposed Erminaz's plans for revolt to then Governor Varus, but his warnings were ignored by Varus, who was overconfident of his ability to judge men's intentions. The governor's arrogance cost him and

three legions their lives and the territory east of the Rhine that Rome had hoped to include within its empire.

"But surely your father will come around to your side and accept Erminaz when you are wed Princess. If the gods are willing you will bear grandsons for Segestes from Erminaz. How can he reject his own grandchildren?" said Blandina.

Blandina was enduringly optimistic about an eventual rapprochement of father and daughter. The maid felt affection for both her mistress and Segestes and the hostility between daughter and father was a clear violation of the natural order in her estimation. There was, as well, a subtle undertone of envy or perhaps sadness in her remarks about the hoped for children coming from the Princess and Prince. Blandina had come to the unhappy acceptance that she would never bear children herself. Among her people in Gaul this was a certain sign that the gods did not favor her.

Thusnelda recognized this regret and longing in her maid. On rare occasions the issue of child bearing had arisen, more in the events that occurred rather than in explicit discussions. In fact, there had been no great discussion between her and the maid on this subject. Rather, Thusnelda could see the mixed expressions of joy and sadness in the face of her maid when women in the tribe gave birth.

"I wish I could agree with your assessment Blandina. I know how strongly my father feels about his former allegiance with the Romans. It would be an act of divine intervention if he accepts my marriage to Erminaz, even if there are children who spring from it," replied Thusnelda with an unhappy sigh.

By now the sun had risen high enough that its rays coming through the opening in the front wall illuminated the inside of the hut. "Tend to the fire Blandina. It is flickering near to extinction," said Thusnelda.

Arrival of the Prince

In the third hour after sunrise the scout emerged breathless from the snowy forest. His running kicked up sparkling snowflakes in his wake. Frost from his forced breathing had congealed on his beard, which could not hide the happiness in his face. He was coming with great news for which the village had been excitedly waiting.

"The Prince and his men should be here within the hour! I have seen him and his warriors from my vantage on the hilltop. They are in the river valley near by!" exclaimed the scout.

The village suddenly sprang into activity from the morning indolence, which was the usual state of affairs among the Germani. The news initiated a rapid gathering of hunters who were dispatched into the surrounding forests to bring in game for the inevitable feast that night. Erminaz would certainly bring with him a large party; nearly 200 men were expected to be with him. Tuns of mead were taken from storage to be available for that night's revelries after the

marriage vows were pronounced by the Prince and Princess. Thusnelda had required that all the villagers be invited and needed to participate in the celebration for it was to be a public event. This marriage was more than a convenient bonding of tribes for political convenience. In the Princess's view every Cheruscan, and hopefully other Germani, would benefit from the union of Erminaz and Thusnelda.

Thusnelda came out herself to ensure that the preparations were faithfully carried out. This was not a task she wanted to leave to her servants. Her new husband was coming and she was determined that he receive a reception fitting to his and her status.

"Blandina. Go and announce to my father and his men that Erminaz will be here within the hour!" ordered Thusnelda. Although she knew this was not happy tidings for her father, she still respected his status and relationship to her. It would be amiss to let Segestes remain unaware of the imminent arrival of Erminaz.

Blandina ran through mud and snow to the village's end where Segestes and his partisans were kept under guard by men loyal to Erminaz.

End of sample

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