

## 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 Cherusans 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 common place 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 recognize 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 snow flakes in his wake. Frost from his forced breathing had congealed on his beard which could not hid 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.

“Sir, Erminaz will be here within the hour!”, said Blandina rather cheerfully to the old man sitting in the dimly lit hut at the village's rim.

“I suspected as much from the sudden furor of activity in the village.”, sighed Segestes in reply to Blandina.

There was a definite sadness in the old man's response which moved the maid. Blandina had always been treated kindly by Segestes. She was untutored in the politics of the time and it mattered little to her personally if the Romans or the Germanis ruled. Her situation as barren maid servant would not be changed. In her naivete and unabashed optimism she continued,

“There will be a great feast tonight with fresh game, mead, dancing, singing and poems after the wedding vows are exchanged. Surely you will come to celebrate with your daughter, sir?”, said Blandina.

In the darkness of the hut she could barely see the tears in the old man's eyes, for the area where Segestes and his men were kept was still buried in the shade of the surrounding pine trees. In a choked voice mixed between grief and hostility the man answered,

“Tell my daughter that I am ill and not able to leave my dwelling. The servers can bring me a bit of meat and water here in my hut tonight.”

“May Tiwaz heal you sir!”, replied Blandina.

Blandina returned with the anticipated answer to Thusnelda. Even though the Princess had expected her father would be absent the reality of his refusal to attend still caused a twinge in her heart. Thusnelda had learned that life was a sequence of joys mixed with sorrows. At the moment when Blandina returned she saw her husband ride into the village with his cohort of fighting men. The villagers went into wild exclamations as Erminaz arrived. Even the village's warriors wept with joy upon his arrival. Many of them had been with him seven years earlier on the Varus campaign. They reached out to touch his hands and clashed their framea against their shields as a sign of approval. Segimuntus, Thusnelda's brother came forward to greet Erminaz. Segimuntus, much to Segestes disapproval, had joined Erminaz in the war against Varus.

Erminaz rode straight through to Thusnelda who was waiting for him in the village center. Alighting from his horse he stood before her completely mute at first. Both bride and groom were speechless with

tears in their eyes. At last he was here with her.

### **The Wedding Feast**

The night was illuminated by a large bon fire in the center of the village. During the autumn the villagers had collected wood to store in a weather proof tent to keep out the cold rains of late fall. Now the cold December night of the winter solstice was illuminated and warmed by the crackling flames. Embers shot upwards from the popping twigs to join the stars. The gladness of the wedding guests was echoed by the fire's singing. Thusnelda and Erminaz sat at the place of honor with the bride to the groom's right side. An arch made of evergreen boughs rose up around the bride and groom as a sign of fidelity. On Erminaz's left sat Segimuntus. Thusnelda's right hand place was conspicuously vacant since this place was reserved for the bride's father. The significance of the empty place was not lost on the villagers, but they were determined not to let his absence detract from the gaiety of the marriage celebration. Erminaz greatly appreciated her determination to be loyal to him, despite the natural obedience a daughter owed to her father. She was an unusual woman for her times, a fit companion for the Prince.

Erminaz placed his spear on the ground between himself and Thusnelda. Since this weapon was his dedicated means of defending himself against his enemies, entrusting this device to the Princess signified his total trust and dependence on her. Thusnelda during the evening's celebrations ceremoniously picked up the spear and handed it back to Erminaz as a sign of her permanent devotion to him. She was pledging her constant support of her husband in his trials. These visual signs were clear evidence for the villagers that the couple were truly pledged to one another. Feasting and drinking followed the exchange of wedding vows. Erminaz began the festivity with a wedding ode to his bride.

### **Erminaz's wedding song**

Thusnelda is the daughter of heaven,  
Her eyes blessed with the blue purity of the sky.  
Thusnelda is the daughter of dawn,  
Her golden braids tinted with subtle reds  
Like the rising sun's splendor.  
Thusnelda is the daughter of Ostera,  
Her perfumed breath bears the gladness of Spring.  
You have captured my heart my princess.  
You are my balm and rest like the  
Sweetness of the rainfall on a summer afternoon.  
Come with me my love my bride come  
To the dragon's crag high above the Rhine.  
There we shall spend the nights in honeyed embrace  
And watch the clouds at dawn that blanket the Rhine.  
There we shall build a castle with many rooms  
For Thusnelda will be the fruitful mother of  
Many princes and princesses nursed at  
Her lovely and generous breasts.  
Look to the east my bride my love  
As the rising sun greets your lands of Germania.  
Look to the west my bride my love  
As the setting sun fires your lands  
In Gaul aglow.

Thusnelda continued the festivities with an ode to her groom.

### **Thusnelda's wedding song**

Erminaz is a warrior.

Erminaz is a wolf who leaps

Among the valleys, in his right hand his spear,

In his left hand the head of the carrion eagle.

The young men gather about him like wolves.

His wolf packs destroyed the legions of the Eagle.

Their bones lie scattered along the river.

Erminaz is a king who protects his people.

They gathered gladly when he called.

They breathe in deeply the freedom he gave them.

Erminaz is a king who liberates his people in the east.

Erminaz is a king who will liberate those in the west.

My love stands strong with legs like the oaks.

My love's strong right arm drives the tyrants away.

They scatter like sheep when the wolf appears.

You have captured my heart, oh Prince of Germania!

Next special mead, blessed by the gods, so it was believed, inspired the would be bards to break into song and poetry. The odes by the bards were the principal mechanisms by which the history and lore of the tribes could be conserved. Written records were near to non existent so these songs provided the continuity between the generations. Odes that incorporated the natural world were particularly significant for a people whose lives revolved so closely around the forests and rivers. Most villagers never had the opportunity to travel far from their place of birth so songs of distant lands served as a geography lesson, even if the content was mythical.

That trees, for example, could communicate with men was taken on faith, for example, as recorded in this song of a traveler;

### **The Song of the Trees**

“One day in my cottage by the sea  
A strange desire came over me  
To leave my nets and boats behind  
And to tread the lawn of the forest pines.  
My wanderings led me far from home  
Away to the lands where the earth is stone  
Away to the forests and valleys and streams  
Away to fields where naught but horizons are seen  
Over swaying grains of purple and gold  
Away to the trees that are ages old.  
The oldest trees in the oldest dales  
Sing constantly the oldest tales  
Of snow fields and clouds and winds  
That they knew which daily over the  
Mountains flew, bringing them  
Water from the glaciated caps  
Circling the forest with a rainy veil.  
One day I left the forest's domain  
And headed across a desolate plain  
Where the trees slowly yielded their  
Land to rock and stubble and chafing sand.

Amazed was I then when I saw the oak  
With its shriveled leaves and dusty bark.  
Perhaps it was real, perhaps it was heat  
the trance of the oak and the words that he spoke.

'In the spot where you stand there once stood a pine  
He was a faithful friend of mine.  
When I was young and the wind was strong  
He would stretch out his boughs so green and  
So strong to shelter me from the fierce  
Wind's blast. One day the heat and the sun  
Broke my pine. He lay at my roots,  
Lifeless, supine.'

The oak then shook and in a low  
Tone sang the "Song of the Trees".

'A thousand leaves upon a bough move randomly  
At will until a subtle harmony pervades through  
Them until the simple sigh of each small leaf  
In chorus makes a symphony.'

The spell then broke and I heard no more  
But the bleating wind in the stifling air.  
So I turned to walk back to my boats

and my nets to fish in the midst of  
The ocean's roar. Never again have I seen the oak  
Never again have I heard the song.  
But I sing here for you the words that he spoke  
And the Song of the Trees.”

Odes of this nature and some very bad ones too were sung during the night. As the mead flowed liberally the discernment of the villagers accommodated the quality of the bards. In fact, only Blandina among the celebrants could distinguish between the attempts of the bards because she did not partake of the mead. During the celebrations she sat as close to the Princess as protocol would allow, with her left face illuminated by the bonfire and her right face in the dark. Blandina was ready to respond to her mistress's needs but her vigilance was superfluous for the Princess's attention was entirely devoted to her spouse.

Once the celebration was fully alive she took meat and mead to Segestes's tent. The low fire flickered lamely in the corner of his hut. Segestes was grateful and glad to see the maid. He had always felt empathy and kindness for this unfortunately deformed young woman. Blandina stepped into the tent saying,

“I pray that the gods have healed you sir. I bring you meat and mead from the feast. Your daughter sends you her best wishes for your health to improve.”

Of course, Segestes believed that this salutation was a bit of an embellishment by Blandina. Both he and his daughter tacitly employed Blandina as an intermediary. Blandina knew this well herself and since she had deep affection for both father and daughter she played the role of ambassador as best she could.

“You are a kind woman Blandina. Tell my daughter that I thank her for wishing me well.”, replied Segestes.

As the bonfire in the village center faded and the intoxicated villagers went to their night's rest, Blandina escorted the young couple to the quarters that had been prepared for them. A fire had been started for them in a corner of their hut which was amply supplied with animal furs and an elevated bed with curtains drawn around it to keep out the wind and keep in the body heat. Freshly cut branches of pine boughs decorated the hut. The warmth from the fire allowed the frozen sap to exhale a sweet vanilla scent, a signature hallmark of the pine. Blandina left them to go to her separate hut.

Blandina was happy for the Princess but there was also a current of sadness arising in the maid because this marriage, once again, highlighted her contrasting lot. Her bed was a crude wooden construction elevated enough off the ground that blocks of straw could be shoved underneath the bed as an obstacle to the cold damp ground. She wrapped herself completely with animal skins in the darkened hut.

Blandina would never light a fire for her own needs.

The only sound the maiden heard over night in her solitary bed was the moaning of the snow laden branches in the pine forest buffeted by the wind. No one she knew could explain the origin of the wind, but the popular assessment was that it was the work of the gods. The gods were surely fickle for their handiwork mirrored this trait. Sometimes the winds were gentle and sweet and sometimes raw and violent. Now near the winter solstice the cold northern wind chilled the very marrow and congealed the blood. Even the bears with their thick fur coats were compelled to hide.

But in the warming months of Ostera a caressing southerly wind bore messages of perfumed lavender

from her far away home in the Rhone Valley. Blandina listened attentively to this wind whenever it came. She was convinced she could hear voices, voices of her mother and father, her sisters and brothers in distant Lugdunum. The south wind was a kindly god who provided her with the only contact of home in her exile here, east of the Rhine. Although the face numbing north wind ruled the air for most of this season, the maid had her precious store of memories of home. Often she fell asleep comforted by the images of her youth, of warm sunny fields, of flowering trees beneath a benevolent sky that yearned to kiss the forests of Lugdunum, of youthful play with her sisters and brothers in the oak groves of the Rhone.

In contrast to Thusnelda and Erminaz, cold wind rattling the hut was her sole companion. The only heart beat concealed under the animal skins would be her own. Blandina would never have a spouse despite the natural yearning to calm her physical and psychological needs. Never would she feel the warm embrace of a husband or the gentle breathing of a baby at her breasts. Her facial deformity was too much of an obstacle for suitors.

Erminaz was filled with the joy of finally possessing his bride in her natural glory. She was surely a gift from the gods. Thusnelda was definitely the prize for which he had obstinately waited. Running his fingers through her long hair, firelight reflected off the golden strands highlighted with subtle strains of red. Beauty was befitting his bride. Beauty radiated from her.

Thusnelda was intoxicated with her groom. Never before had she been so close to a man. The heat and scent from his body was enough to evoke waves of ecstasy through her being even before he placed his hands on her. Husband and wife could now totally give themselves to each other. Tenderness, passion and joy kissed in this night. She saw the scars on his arms and legs and torso from the many battles he had fought. He could tell her the origin of each wound. But beyond the physical wounds she could see

he was vulnerable in ways that no other person could know. The world, outside the community formed by this woman and her husband, would and could never know the anxieties and spiritual struggles faced by Erminaz.

This man, the Liberator of Germania, the sorrow of Augustus Caesar, could melt into tears in her arms. The intimacy of the marriage bed precluded the possibility to dissemble. The fidelity they had sworn to each other in the public ceremony would now be sealed with the actual union, in heart, body and soul. She knew, in an unspoken way, that this union was more than the complementarity of their bodies and even their thoughts and beliefs. Indeed, she sensed that a third person arose from this union, a union that was greater than the sum of its parts. Every sound, every odor, every movement of the couple, even the sighing of the wind roughly caressing the pine forest echoing in nature the ecstatic embracing in the bridal chamber, all the sensations she experienced that night were inextricably forged into a nexus and indelibly stored in her memory. ... §

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§ In deference to the sanctity of the marriage bed and the Princess's own sensibility I decline to go further into her descriptions of their first night as husband and wife.