

The Trial

by: [Panic](#)

This story was originally written for Magnus69's 'Challenge 2001' and has been released for posting by the author.

A chilly autumn wind swirled around Elissa as she shivered, fearing the worst. Already, dozens of educated scholars and town leaders debated her fate at length as if she weren't even an active participant anymore. Once, when she defiantly spoke up in her own defense, she was tethered tightly to a sturdy pillar of granite, unable to budge an inch. Even breathing proved to be difficult for the once free-spirited damsel, since her bindings cinched her, pulling her shoulder blades uncomfortably. Afterwards, she had learned her lesson, subjugating herself as another mere witness, obediently silent.

If it weren't for the cruel trickery of another, she would still be feeding the lambs and grooming the horses on her father's large estate. As the angered voices of her accusers faded into the distant recesses of her mind, forming a cacophony of rage, she remembered her carefree days playing in the lush countryside. 'Harvest days are almost over now,' thought Elissa with a heavy heart.

The trouble began as the last flakes of snow dissolved under the rejuvenated sun. That wonderful spring she'd met Theron. Even now, under the pressure of such unyielding scrutiny, she had to admit that Theron looked like a god slumming among mortals as he cantered up to her on his powerful steed. 'Perhaps he loved me once,' thought Elissa as she strained against her tight fastening ropes.

The virile man deflowered her that very same day, wooing her with poetry and song. No doubt about it, Theron possessed many charms. They heartily drank blood red wine together as they embraced, sending Elissa's thoughts spinning in delight. After bidding farewell to her family, she fled with him, carelessly riding bareback through the soggy terrain. "Have you ever been to Carthage, darling?"

Elissa smiled at the man before replying, "Of course I have. My father has taken me to Carthage many times to acquire supplies from the merchants. Vergil, the blacksmith, is a dear friend of my father's."

"Well, isn't this a treat!" said the gregarious man. "Already, I've found a suitable guide. I can't wait to see Carthage through those emerald eyes of yours." Elissa glowed inside as she cradled his muscular stomach.

For several days they journeyed, resting in the lush hinterland as the watchful sun faded into the horizon. Theron proved to be a skilled hunter. Each night he would return to Elissa carrying a bounty of fleshy meat to cook on the open flame. She couldn't help but admire his resourcefulness.

On the third day, they could see Carthage in the distance, shimmering like a radiant diamond. The brown stone of many structures beckoned them warmly, calling them closer. Elissa could see a glimmer of life in Theron's eyes as they entered the main square. Certainly, she remembered her first visit to this magnificent city herself not so long ago. She could fully understand Theron's awe.

"Where should we go first?" asked Elissa as she gently tapped his broad shoulder.

Theron's distracted glance faded. "We should visit your blacksmith friend. I'm in need of some fresh spear tips and arrowheads," replied Theron.

Using a calm and steady voice, Elissa directed Theron's path, winding him through dirt paths and stony roads. For his part, Theron seemed to take in his surroundings with uncanny clarity, mentally recording their progress. As they approached a modest tan homestead, they could hear the clanking sound of metal striking metal, forming hot steel into useful tools and weapons with will and sweat.

Before they could even dismount from Theron's snarling horse, a deep voice shouted, "Elissa! Well, this is certainly a pleasant surprise!" As the bulging man with the thick beard wiped beads of sweat from his brow, he asked, "Where's your father this morning? Does he need a new plow blade?"

“No, Vergil, he’s doing fine, thanks. I’m just here visiting.” She politely hugged the vibrant man, sputtering as he gripped her tighter than he probably should have.

After finally releasing his grasp, he asked, “So, who’s your friend, little one?”

“Vergil, I’d like you to meet Theron. I’m showing him around your fine city.”

Vergil traced an apprehensive eye up and down Elissa’s new traveling companion. After an uncomfortable delay, he reached out a hairy hand. “Pleased to meet you, Theron.”

“Likewise, sir.” He stifled a grin as he returned Vergil’s powerful handshake, holding his own with the forceful blacksmith. A battle of wills began right then and there, each man seeing who’d end the searing pain first.

Surprisingly, Vergil was the first to retreat, cracking his knuckles in dejection.

“Elissa, you should head inside. I’m sure Diana would love to see you,” offered Vergil with a noticeable wince as he massaged his weary hand.

Without reservation, Elissa bounded over to the house. After politely knocking on the door, she was led inside by a radiant woman, a matron so dear to Elissa that a casual observer would have assumed they were sharing a mother and daughter homecoming. Immediately, Elissa was offered a plate full of figs, grapes and pomegranates.

Outside, in the workshop, Vergil was grilling the enigmatic stranger, hoping to ascertain his intentions for the beloved Elissa. While he prepared Theron’s arrowheads and spearheads, his mind was ticking away, trying to calculate his customer’s homeland based on his peculiar accent. Something seemed out of place and dangerous about the boisterous man, yet he couldn’t put his finger on the source of this immediate mistrust.

As Diana and Elissa supped on sweet fruit and wine, they talked enthusiastically about the future. Elissa revealed her fiery courtship with Theron. Immediately, Diana could empathize with her friend’s passion and zeal for her first love.

Carthage was entering a golden age of prosperity, announced Diana with equal enthusiasm, and she looked forward to the expansion of her precious city. Certainly the fear of war with Rome was still a real threat, but Diana had confidence in her leaders, particularly Mago Brettius, one of the city’s most prestigious politicians. Already, Diana explained, reparations were being made to ensure a peaceful resolution with the Romans.

Elissa was fascinated with the new politics of the region, yet remained passive. After all, she was a simple country girl. Such diplomatic matters didn’t seem to involve her. However, working the land with her father was indeed a grueling task, one she wasn’t in a hurry to continue. With a flourish, Elissa boldly announced her desire to live in Carthage.

After the men finished their business in the shop, they joined the ladies inside. Lifting a glass in celebration, they offered a joyous prayer to the gods. By nightfall, they all settled in for the night. Vergil and Diana shared the main room, and in the other room, Theron and Elissa shared warm embraces all through the night.

In the morning, Vergil used his influence to acquire suitable shelter for his darling friend. In order to avoid any scandalous rumors for his dear Elissa, he made solo arrangements for her, assuming that Theron would probably follow with discretion.

From their tiny homestead, Elissa and Theron witnessed many startling changes for their wondrous city, and the region in general. Already, Utica had surrendered to Rome in a preemptive move, which put tremendous pressure on the senators of Carthage. Steps were made to disband the Carthaginian military force after receiving pressure to do so by the Romans. Yet, in the heat of that very summer, the generals of Rome were preparing to invade Carthage by force. The Romans had already prematurely declared war.

The Carthaginian envoys, including Mago Brettius, returned with the horrific news. Mago addressed the townspeople with an ultimatum: either surrender to the Romans or prepare to repel and fight an invasion from them. Contrary to Theron’s deepest resolve, the majority of the people agreed to submit to the demands of Quintus Fabius Maximus, the latest in a long line of emperors. Those who surrendered themselves to the Roman authority surrendered all territory, together with all the men and women, rivers, harbors, temples, and tombs, so that the Romans would become actual lords of all these. By surrendering, the Carthaginians would become lords of nothing whatsoever. The people were distressed about this unfortunate turn of events, yet they still maintained hope for the future. After all, Carthage would prove to be a vital port for the Romans to expand, opening new opportunities for prosperity.

In Theron’s mind, such thoughts of financial gain were delusional. The only honorable way to handle such a threat would be to fight, to the death if necessary, to remain lords of their own domain, rather than to become subservient to

the will of a distant Roman emperor. Without consulting Elissa, he plotted to derail Carthage's plans for surrender.

Early one dawn, he shook Elissa awake, saying he needed her to travel with him immediately. She questioned his actions. A sense of dread filled her thoughts like a ringing thunderclap within a pitch-black cloud. As the plight of Carthage was becoming unstable, so too was their once blissful relationship. Theron would sleep very little, if at all, and he seemed to be carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. His skill with a blade was serving him well, since he was maintaining suitable employment as a butcher. However, on this morning, she worried that Theron was acting without sanity. In truth, he was never surer of himself or what he felt needed to be done.

Quietly, he boosted Elissa onto his horse before mounting as well. With a forceful kick, he sent them surging forward, along the dusty path. Before long, he had led his steed to the sea front. As they came to a halt, he handed the reins to Elissa, instructing her to return home. Before he disappeared into the shadows, he commanded, "Never tell a soul about our ride this morning."

While Elissa confusedly strode homeward, Theron leapt into action. Rome's first demand was for Carthage to transport 300 hostages, sons of the many senators and politicians, to Lilybaeum within 30 days. The emperor himself demanded the surrender of these young men, the future leaders of Carthage. Theron quickly concluded that if he could prevent such a delivery, then Carthage would be forced to fight Rome, no matter what the cost.

As expected, security around the ship was meager and ill prepared for Theron's slashing sword. Within moments, each of the four guards splashed lifelessly into the water. Yet, the worst was not over. For if Theron freed the men on board the ship, they would undoubtedly be gathered again to be sent to Lilybaeum, assuming they'd accept emancipation in the first place. Too much pride was involved for these men to flee; they'd rather die than fail their people. So, once on board, he silently murdered dozens of men in their sleep, slicing their throats. The gurgling commotion eventually roused many others, and they fought him using anything they could find. Some attacked using benches or planks. Others merely sacrificed their bodies, lunging aggressively at the attacker using pure will and strength alone.

Yet Theron destroyed like a man possessed, severing arms and plunging chests with a skill unrivaled. After gallons of blood had been spilled, the gathering throng of hostages soon began to deliver harsh blows, sending Theron to his knees. As his sword fell from his hand with a clamoring thud, he proclaimed, "I did this for the honor of Carthage." In disgust, once young man clubbed him in the head, silencing Theron's voice forever.

As the horrifying news reached the people, many wept at the senseless waste of it all. The instant Vergil heard of Theron's deadly tirade, his heart sank in disgust. In grief and horror, he reached out for his own blade and ended his shame.

Elissa heard the panicked screams as she anxiously waited for her beloved Theron to return to her. Yet she never concluded that he'd been the cause of the tumultuous public outcry. A soft and faint knock at the door sent her lunging. There in the entrance stood darling Diana, tear soaked and despondent.

"Theron has killed hundreds of hostages, Elissa. Vergil is dead; he killed himself after hearing about the tragedy."

Elissa's blood ran cold immediately. "Theron couldn't have...he wouldn't... why would he...?"

As Diana slumped down to the chilly floor, she sobbed uncontrollably. "Poor Vergil! He couldn't live with the guilt, knowing that he'd crafted the very sword used to kill so many dutiful Carthaginians."

"I can't believe it," whispered Elissa as she once again faced her accusers.

"...And thus plotted to destroy these brave young boys, our future, the sons of Carthage. He single handedly murdered them to betray us, to deny the will of the people, to force us into war with the Romans. I've lost two sons at his hand, and I demand justice."

"But she claims she didn't know about her husband's heinous plan."

"She rode with him to the slaughter. She brought this coward to our city in the first place. She's a co-conspirator and a traitor."

The crowd pressed in tighter, raucously demanding that someone, anyone, pay for the tragic fall of their kingdom. Chants of "guilty, Guil-ty, GUIL-TY" began to spread like a brush fire through the mob, until the sheer volume and venom made Elissa's eyes well up with tears.

Her sole defender quickly began to relent to the unyielding public outrage. He walked over to where she was strapped down and nodded dolefully, silently apologizing to her for not successfully freeing her from the bile of the masses. She lowered her eyes in understanding and somber appreciation.

“Do we need to deliberate?” asked Mago to the delegates and senators that would decide Elissa’s fate. Thirty grave nods replied louder than any proclamation ever could. “It is the judgment of this court, Elissa Domine, wife of Theron, daughter of Harmis, that you are guilty of treason against the citizens of Carthage. Furthermore, you are also found guilty as an accessory to murder.” After banging his table to silence the large crowd gathered in the pavilion, he continued. “This is a dark day for our city. While you may not have been the one wielding the sword that ended so many promising lives, the evidence proves that you are responsible for these crimes by matter of proximity, assisting your mate, Theron, with his mass execution. May the gods take pity on you, Elissa Domine.” Several whispers drifted towards Elissa as the elders contemplated her punishment.

Hundreds of vengeful faces projected their wrath at Elissa as she bowed her head in grief and shame. ‘Perhaps I am guilty,’ thought Elissa with regret. ‘I should have tried to stop Theron that fateful morning.’

At last, Mago banged his gavel once again before making his announcement. “The severity of this crime is so great that normal means of punishment prove inadequate. However, we have made a decision. Since you saw fit to decide the future of Carthage without regard for the will of the people, we have decided that you shall serve as a silent witness to the consequences of your selfish act. From this day forth, you shall become a lifeless monument, forever becoming a symbol of Carthage’s darkest hour. Children yet to be born will know of your malicious act and look upon you with spite and contempt. And you will be there to witness it all until the end of time.”

A shudder of abject fear quaked through Elissa’s body as she heard the decree. In the audience, a lone voice could be heard in protest above the raucous jeering of the crowd. Even though it was faint, Elissa could make out the words with full clarity. “Stay strong, Elissa! I believe in you!” Eventually, the mob pushed Diana aside, silencing her by force. Yet in that moment of foreboding and terror, it calmed Elissa to know that even in her darkest hour, one friend still held love for her even when the rest of the world despised her.

“Prepare her for preservation!”

Three surly guards swiftly marched over to Elissa and removed her bindings. She found herself quickly heaved up within their powerful arms and lifted over to the large façade. Ropes were lowered from the grand platform at the top of the pavilion. With little resistance from Elissa, she was tied then hoisted to the very top, in full view of the ravenous crowd beneath. A solemn hooded figure stood alone with her at the pinnacle.

“It is time, my child,” offered the shrouded man with a hint of sympathy in his weathered voice. “How do you wish to be preserved?”

Elissa’s thoughts drifted as thousands of curious eyes studied her from below. Never before had she even considered the possibility of being rendered permanently immobile in public like this, to be viewed by anyone just passing through. During her short life, Elissa had been reserved and modest. However, with her new status as a public outcast, she decided to doff her flowing sarong to reveal her exotic body for all to admire. After all, she was proud of her beauty and didn’t want it hidden away under folds of fabric. While she gently composed herself on the shelf-like platform, the doleful man reached into an ancient box, producing what looked to be a single green scale. From the corner of her eye, Elissa wondered if it was from some sort of strange reptile.

While chanting in an ancient tongue, the mysterious shaman pressed the thin scale against Elissa’s forehead. Almost immediately, she noticed her heartbeat slowing and her movements becoming utterly ceased. Panic gripped her immediately as she felt her blood calcifying within her veins, clotting her precious life flow.

Suddenly, the wizard lifted his finger away from Elissa, leaving the green remnant behind, still glued to her forehead. Swirling winds swept through the pavilion, twisting the many banners and flags to their maximum extent. Elissa continued to stand silently, thoroughly enraptured by the magical force of that harmless-looking scale. Turning to the ravenous horde, the hooded man raised his hands then shouted:

“Under Athena’s watchful eye
We offer up this mortal cry:
May the power of the Gorgon scale
Make her skin grow cold and pale.
Root her forever to this place,

Lock the features of her face.
Make her rigid, firm and strong,
So she will last when we are gone.
To be a witness, to be a slave,
To never rest within a grave.
Transform her flesh to solid stone
So she can ponder all alone
Why Carthage fell by her own hand
Plundered by a foreign land.”

With the words recited, an eldritch glow began to encircle Elissa’s motionless body, caressing her in warmth and bathing her in iridescent light. Loud crackling sounds filled the air as Elissa felt her muscles tightening, her skin constricting. Like a prisoner within her own body, she could only sense the sweeping changes as they rolled through her. The crowd looked on in wonder as her skin began to harden, pink hues altering, forming pristine patches of marble. The hooded man noticed the changes to Elissa as well, and he watched intently as Elissa’s feet became permanently fused to the durable platform they both shared. Shimmering sparks of emerald light danced across Elissa’s motionless body while the crowd hollered in delight. Many amongst them bowed their heads in thanks to the gods for allowing this means of justice.

Yet, for Elissa, the hatred and contempt seemed to fade from her mind. Despite being reviled by the entire city, she felt the oddest sensation welling within her solidifying flesh. It was faint at first, but began to grow. By the time her petite face cemented into a stony mask, she found herself enveloped within the most joyous sensation she’d ever known. As the rumbling force of her spell began to dissipate, all she could feel for the raving masses was unbridled love. The cloaked man once again pressed his finger against her stony forehead, this time to remove the remaining scale. After placing the artifact back in the archival box, he climbed down to join the chanting mass of people.

Suddenly, a giant spark of golden energy formed at the top of Elissa’s now transformed forehead before propelling into the audience. The crowd looked on in utter surprise as the fireball sped towards the grief-stricken Diana, striking her full-force in the chest. She gasped in surprise and revelation before collapsing in a heap on the ground.

Within months, the Romans had invaded Carthage. From her vantage point, Elissa witnessed it all: the landing of the troops, the initial battles and the bloodshed. A part of her felt sympathy for all of the citizens she loved. Undoubtedly, the end of an era had arrived. Using her spiritual influence, Elissa ensured the safety of her darling Diana, melting the hearts of all who would threaten to kill her cherished friend.

After three solid years of fighting, the Carthaginians finally surrendered their broken city to the Romans. In the pavilion, several small celebrations raged into the evening hours. Many Romans spied the enigmatic statue perched within the façade and felt an odd familiarity with the glowing monument.

On her eightieth birthday, poor Diana died quietly in her sleep. Witnesses were astounded by the beatific smile on her face when she died.

Another hundred years went by before Carthage became a city once more under the rule of Augustus. Under the new Roman regime, Carthage began to prosper. Giant buildings and structures sprang up around Elissa on a regular basis. Yet the pavilion was spared demolition dozens of times, despite the rather paltry stature of the aging structure. The area under the façade became a favorite haunt for young lovers, under the watchful eye of the “Mother of Carthage”, as Elissa was now known.

Carthage blossomed, becoming the third largest city in the Roman Empire. Elissa witnessed and felt the life force of millions of lives over the course of five centuries. Yet, war threatened once more as Carthage succumbed to Vandals and eventually to the Byzantine Empire. Reconstruction began anew.

Another two hundred years went by before Carthage fell once more, this time to the Muslims. They considered Elissa’s form an affront to decency, so they cloaked her in thick burlap. Even beneath such hindrance, Elissa watched everything from her lofty perch at the apex of the façade. Over time, many dynasties endured then fell, among them the Aghlabid Dynasty, the Fatimid and Zirides dynasties, and the Husseinite Dynasty. Occupations by the Ottoman Empire and the French changed the fair city of Carthage as well, bringing new people and ideas. The grand beauty of Elissa was once again unearthed and preserved for future generations to appreciate and admire.

Eventually, a new country formed around Carthage, a wondrous new country named Tunisia.

Through it all, Elissa remains stoic and endearing. If you ever happen to travel to Carthage to visit the sights, keep an eye out for the perfect shape of the nude damsel, the “Mother of Carthage”. If you are lucky and of kind spirit, she may just grace you with what locals call the rapture. I guarantee, once consumed by her love, you’ll never see the world the same way again.

[Return to the Story Archive](#)