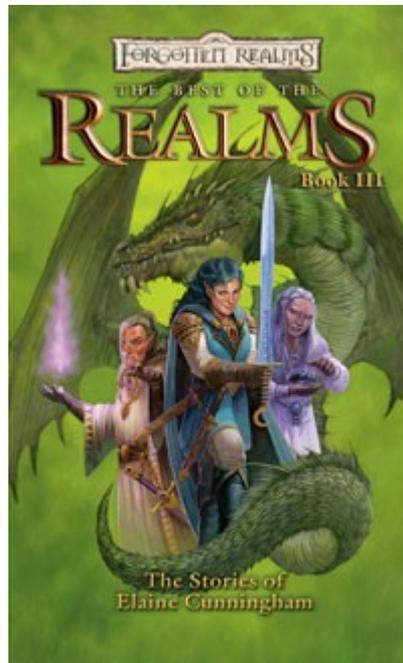


Tribute: A Short Story

By Elaine Cunningham



In a time long past, many generations before men and elves raised a stone in the Dalelands to begin anew the reckoning of years, small bands of barbarians made themselves a home beside a deep water harbor. It was a good place, with fine hunting to be had in the surrounding meadows and forests. So many fish filled the seas that the water could hardly hold them all. Indeed, during each full moon of summer, small silver runchion wriggled ashore to lay eggs in the sand. Gathering these swift and slippery fish was considered great sport, an occasion for merriment and song. No one enjoyed these moonlit hunts more than Sima, one of two daughters born to the village cooper.

Sima was a merry lass, round as a berry and brown as a wren. But her sister, Erlean, was tall and fair, with hair the color of red wheat, and it was Erlean who caught the eye of Brog the chieftain. Bitter were his tears when the lot for the dragon's tribute was cast, and a stone redder than red wheat fell nearest the altar of sacrifice.

In those days, the lands from sea to sea were ruled by dragons, and each summer they came to claim tribute: one maiden, slain upon an altar stone, and carried off to tempt the palate of some distant dragon king. Each year the chieftain cast a handful of stones at the altar: river pebbles of red and white, coal-black stone, lumps of golden amber in every shade from palest blond to brown. The will of the gods decided which stone came to rest closest to the altar. The maiden whose hair was closest in color to that unlucky stone became the summer sacrifice.

Not a single maid in the village, save for Erlean, could boast of hair the color of red wheat.

So fierce was the love of Brog the chieftain for Erlean that he would not give her up. With dark words and soft promises he won the village cooper to his cause. The day of the first full moon of summer, the night when runchions ran and dragons feasted, Brog proclaimed a feast. It was an easy thing for the cooper to add to the mead herbs that would send the villagers into early slumber. All drank but Brog and the cooper, and when Sima slept, they rubbed berry juice into her hair until it was redder than red wheat, and they bound her to the altar stone.

The villagers awakened in full moonlight to the thunder of wings as two red dragons came for the tribute: a warrior wyrm known as Hysta'kiamarh and his mate, a priestess whose name was nothing a human tongue could shape. Fearsome they were, and great was Sima's fear when she found herself upon the altar in her sister's place.

"I am betrayed!" she shrieked. "I am not the chosen sacrifice! Another should die, and not me!"

The warrior wyrm looked down at her, and his great fanged mouth curved into a sly and terrible smile. "I have always found a little treachery in a human to be a fine spice. Name your betrayers, loud morsel, and you shall go free."

"Swear it," Sima insisted. "Swear the most solemn oath you know that the one who caused me to be bound here will die in my place!"

"By the four winds, by the very breath of Tiamat, so shall it be," intoned Hysta'kiamarh.

Once his oath was given, the dragon extended a claw and sliced the ropes binding Sima's hands. She lifted her arm and leveled an accusing finger, sweeping it in a deadly path across the moonlit crowd of gathered Deepwater folk. Fear was written on every familiar face, but it burned brightest in the eyes of those who had betrayed her.

Sima saw what was in the eyes of her father and her chieftain, and for a moment she paused, trembling. Then her hand swept high to point at the largest red dragon.

"It was you, great Hysta'kiamarh," she cried out, "you who demanded this tribute, you who put me on this altar! Human hands tied the knots, but the cords binding all of us are in your grasp. By the ancient bonds of word and wind, it is Hysta'kiamarh who must die in Sima's place!"

Angry steam poured from the dragon's nostrils at these words, and flames leaped and burned within Hysta'kiamarh's yellow eyes. Hissing his rage at the girl's impudence, he raised his talons for the killing stroke.

At once a terrible wind roared up from the sea. A monstrous cloud, dark and dragon-shaped, raced toward the cowering villagers like a killing storm. It swept past Deepwater, only to wheel around in the sky and circle back with deadly intent.

The forsworn dragon tore his eyes from the fearsome sight long enough to send an inquiring glare at his companion.

His mate inclined her horned head in a solemn nod. "The Breath of Tiamat," the priestess confirmed. "As you swore, so shall it be. By word and wind, your life for the maiden's."

And as she spoke, the dragon-shaped cloud swooped down and engulfed Hysta'kiamarh. Cloud and dragon then shot upward toward the watching moon. They disappeared together, high above Deepwater, in a crash that split the sky like the loudest thunder ever heard. A rain of dragon scales clattered down to the hard-trodden mud of Deepwater, sending the villagers into panicked flight.

But the curious moonlight soon worked its way back down through the swirling dust, and the villagers came close behind. All beheld a wondrous sight: the dragon scales had fallen to form an elaborate knot-work circle around the stone altar, upon which stood Sima, unbound and unharmed. The dragon cleric bowed to her as if to a chieftain's daughter.

"The bargain is fulfilled, the tribute is ended," the dragon said, her great voice rolling across sea and shore. "What the warriors of Deepwater could not achieve through strength of arms, one girl has won through her cleverness and loyalty." Then the she-dragon leaped into the sky, and was gone.

The villagers stood amazed, then as one they fell on their knees before the maiden who had saved them.

Sima climbed down from the altar to take her father by one hand and Brog, her sister's betrothed, by another. Raising them up, she gaily said, "The moon is full, and the runchions will soon return to the sea. Just because the dragons cannot eat, there is no reason why we should not!"

Merrily the people of Deepwater made their way down to the sands. They chased the fleeing little fish with much sport and laughter, until the moon went to its daytime slumber to the sound of happy songs, and the good scent of runchion stew.

To this very day, the dragon scale mosaic can be seen in Virgin's Square, harder than any stone. Thanks to Sima, never again did the dragons of the North demand a blood tribute from the people of Waterdeep.