

With a web of dark spells the sorcerer Dahlor Magman had ensnared the maiden Pazhè. The hunter Atírin would dare anything to free her -- but would even a witch challenge the mightiest mage in the lost land of Armágin? And as a forgotten evil from the deeps of time wakes, madness looms for those who seek its power and those who resist alike.

The Last Offering

by Donald Huffman Graff

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THE LAST OFFERING

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Great

Ocean

The

Bay

Coast

The

Chapter 1

The true beginning is clouded and the roots of the tale go deep into the forgotten past. But so that any who yet hear with their eyes may know this, as it happened, it may serve to begin when word of the strangers' arrival at Sálanay came to Káragir, provoking puzzled and uneasy reactions from those who first learned of it, late upon a spring day.

The time of their arrival itself seemed odd. Their having gone to Sálanay, a shunned place with its primeval monolith, made it clear that this was no trading journey like those of summer, when voyagers brought rings and bracelets of beaten silver from the Valley and of gold from the River-mouths, and boxes carved of redwood and mats woven of aromatic arborvitae bark from the Bay, and carried the arrowheads, knives, axes, and sundry tools the metalworkers of the villages around Lake Duril hammered out of copper to the far regions of Armágin inhabited by the seven tribes of the Arbir. Springtime rather was when people began anew the tasks precluded by the winter snows, tasks which had taken many of Káragir's folk out of the village — tending their gardens, gathering roots and herbs, paddling their boats out onto the Lake with lines and nets, or going out into the forest with their bows.

And so Atírin had left his father's house at dawn, when the mist had still been upon the river, taking the family's boat upstream. Before the sun had climbed halfway up the eastern sky, he crouched beside a maple atop a gully through which recent rains still trickled down to the river,

some distance off and hidden by the trees. He waited, gripping his bow, an arrow nocked. Keeping still, breathing as quietly as possible, he sought the right moment to shoot, eyes fixed on three shapes moving through the saplings and ferns below.

One paused, and Atírin saw his moment. Holding the great bow of yew steady before him, he drew the bowstring and arrow back, took swift aim, and released. The bowstring snapped taut with a thrum as the arrow flew, arching below the overhanging boughs.

The sound and motion alerted his quarry below. The doe and the fawn leapt over mossy fallen trunks and tree limbs away into the forest, but before the buck could follow the arrow pierced its neck. It started thrashing around through the underbrush where it had been browsing with the other deer, now vanished. Atírin shot again as the wounded buck staggered toward the trees. The arrow struck just forward of the buck's flank and the animal slumped to the ground.

Atírin descended through the ferns to the fallen buck. He took his knife from its sheath and made quick cuts to remove his arrows. He bled the deer and, stripping off his brown buckskin tunic, dressed out the game as he had done many times in his twenty years, as he and his brothers had been taught by their father.

Reaching with his knife into the warm innards, feeling for the windpipe and gullet to cut, he touched the heart that had only just ceased beating when the deer's spirit had fled. He felt as always a disquiet he could never pause to ponder, as game had to be gutted promptly so the meat would have no taint.

For Pazhè's family it should be good, Atírin told himself.

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He hung the gutted buck from a sapling supported by forked poles cut with his axe, then took the whetstone from the pouch at his belt and sharpened his knife while the carcass drained. After skinning the deer, he tied his tunic around his waist, pushed his black ponytail aside, and slung the hide and carcass across his broad shoulders. He descended the gully to the riverbank, where the boat of hide stretched over a wooden frame rested. He stowed the carcass, salted and wrapped up the deerskin, and then washed his arms and torso in the river. Despite the coolness of the spring morning he had been sweating, and the deer's blood was attracting flies.

Donning his tunic, he pushed the laden boat onto the water and climbed in. Putting his paddle to the water, he began moving himself in tandem with the homeward flow of the river, the Morákim. Atírin now gave silent thanks to the spirits of the forest for letting the buck fall to his arrows, for a sudden shift in the wind could have warned the deer. In time the people would repay the spirits with a gift, but Atírin felt the debt whenever the hunt was good.

Atírin paddled downstream toward the Lake. It was early afternoon when he brought the boat to the far bank. He shouldered the deer's carcass again and headed down a forest trail. After some time, he came to a clearing in which stood a small, rectangular house built of rough-hewn timbers with a high-peaked roof of wooden slats.

Seeing no one outside, he called out a greeting. Soon a youth some years younger than Atírin appeared in the open door. Like Atírin his hair was black, his eyes brown, and he wore a deer-hide tunic and trousers.

"Hello, Atírin," said the youth.

"Hello, Púnaman. I've bought a gift," Atírin said. "Are your father and mother here?"

"No, father went with mother and Pazhè to their garden," Púnaman said. "They should be back soon. But let's get that venison into the storage pit now." Atírin entered the house and followed Púnaman past the sunken hearth, where the embers of a fire smoldered, to the back of the dim, smoky space. Here Púnaman lifted a trapdoor in the wooden floor and then helped Atírin lower the venison down into the cool pit below.

"Where were you hunting?" Púnaman asked as he replaced the trapdoor.

"South of here," Atírin said.

"Did you see the strangers?" Púnaman asked, looking up with evident interest as he rose.

"No — what strangers?"

"The ones at Sálamay."

"I didn't go that far. How do you know this?"

"Kunánè saw them and spoke to them yesterday."

"She went to Sálamay?"

"So she says."

"And she told you?"

"Well, no. But I heard that as soon as she got back she went and told her neighbors, still in her cloak and carrying her mushroom basket, and then today she went in to the village and told everyone there. Everyone was still talking about it when I went in," Púnaman said.

"Did she say where these strangers came from," Atírin wondered, "and why they went to Sálamay instead of coming here?"

"Kunánè says they're from far away, to the south and east — all the way from the Coast of the Great Ocean," Púnaman replied. "And they are witches."

"Kunánè said so?"

"Yes."

"I see." She would doubtless know, Atírin reflected, being a witch herself. Like all witches she could both cause and cure illness, though she had never been known to harm anyone, only to tend the sick with bezoar and healing herbs, and had likely gone to Sálánay on some mysterious errand. It took almost all day to get there and back, and the place, the dry bed of an ancient lake, was said to be haunted. There lay a great, squared stone of immemorial age, carved with strange signs — one of several such stones scattered across Armágin.

"They told Kunánè they'll be staying there for a few days," Púnaman went on. "Some magical thing, I'd guess."

"Well, likely no one else will see them, as there's no reason to go hunting that far south now."

"Kunánè said to stay away from them, but I'd like to go and see what they're like."

"Well, I won't say strangers must be bad," Atírin said. "But strangers *and* witches? Who knows... it might be better to heed Kunánè."

"I don't know. They didn't do anything bad to Kunánè, did they? I'd go and trade with them, but Sálánay's so far, and I'm not sure what I could take them." Púnaman wanted an axe, Atírin knew, and presumably hoped to obtain some exotic item that he could then trade to a metalworker.

Now they heard a dog barking and voices approaching outside. The wolf-like grey dog rushed through the door first with a greeting bark to Atírin, sniffed him thoroughly, and settled down by the hearth. Three people then entered: Púnaman's black-maned father Buri, his green-eyed mother Tergel, and his sister Pazhè, a slender, long-haired maiden in a pale buff knee-length kirtle of doeskin. Atírin greeted them all respectfully, and for a moment Pazhè's hazel-within-green eyes met his dark ones.

"Thank you, Atírin," Buri said, upon learning of the gift of venison. "We accept it gratefully. Would you like some beer? You must be thirsty from carrying it."

"I am," Atírin admitted. The storage pit was opened again, and favorable words said about the venison as the beer was ladled from the big jar into earthenware beakers. As they drank, Tergel asked about Atírin's parents and brothers and sister. He said they were well, and then Tergel spoke of her garden.

"Pazhè and I will sow buckwheat and barley tomorrow," she said. "And in a clearing nearby there's burdock to gather."

At a loss to make much conversation himself, Atírin listened and nodded. He felt tongue-tied around Tergel and Buri, and even more so with Pazhè there, which made him glad Tergel had filled what might have been an awkward silence. He did remember to offer her and Buri the hide he had left in his boat, but they declined it, and Atírin shortly bade them farewell.

"Goodbye, Pazhè," he said to her last as he left.

"Goodbye, Atírin," she said, with the same look in her eyes as when they had greeted each other.

After Atírin had gone, Pazhè felt uneasy — awkward, out of sorts; she wished she'd been able to talk with him, or better yet slip away with him, as they had on a few chance occasions. But she couldn't now with her parents right there, and today as it happened they had chores for their children. First they addressed her brother.

"Púnaman," Buri said, "go to the houses of your uncles Bekúti and Bořluk, and ask them to bring their families and

join us for dinner tomorrow. We'll need help eating up all this venison." Púnaman ran off and they turned to Pazhè.

"Pazhè," Tergel said, "go outside and sharpen this knife and this axe so we can carve off some venison now."

So Pazhè got the whetstone and the knife and the axe and went outside. She started toward a shady spot on the edge of the clearing that she preferred for such work on sunny days like this, but then it crossed her mind that she could have done this chore just as well indoors, and that her parents might have sent her and her brother away so they could talk privately. Could it be about Atírin and her? She knew she shouldn't do what next occurred to her, but suppose her fate was being discussed? Anxiousness to find out overcoming guilt, she crept back to the far end of the house and slipped beneath the small, high window, set herself down leaning against the wall, and began whetting the knife as quietly as she could. Of course it made a terrible noise that made her wince, but her parents seemed already too engrossed in their conversation to notice.

"Zínibel brought us a rabbit yesterday," Buri was saying, "and now Atírin this venison! With two youths courting Pazhè, I scarcely need to hunt or fish myself."

"Yet we must choose, Zínibel or Atírin," Pazhè heard her mother say.

"Of course, of course," Buri said. "I wouldn't string them along just for the game and fish. You didn't marry a lazy man."

"No," Tergel said, "but for Pazhè's sake we really ought to consider this carefully. Who do you think is the best provider?"

"Well, they both seem to hunt and fish well enough. But all who know Atírin say he's skilled with the bow. Based on what we've seen I'd say he may be the better of

the two, though Zínibel certainly isn't bad, and he is the younger."

"Well, I suppose I'd agree. And in other ways, who do you think will care for her best?"

"The better husband overall? Might as well ask who will be the better father for the children they will someday have. These sorts of things are sometimes clear, but more often are hard to guess."

"True, but again those who know Atírin generally speak well of him. To be fair I hear nothing bad about Zínibel, but all the same not so much praise."

"Yes, I hear much the same things. I think I see where you're going, but nevertheless let's consider everything. Like the two families. Gelnar is a good metalworker..."

Gelnar was Zínibel's father. As her parents went over all the gossip they knew about the two suitors' families and then went on to their genealogies in both their fathers' and mothers' lines, Pazhè's attention wandered. She finished sharpening the knife and started on the axe. She had heard older people go on about this subject for half the night before, about who had married whom and who had gotten into feuds with whom, but it held little interest for her.

"I'd say both families are equally good," Buri finally concluded.

"Yes, there's certainly nothing wrong with either that I've heard," Tergel said.

"You know, it occurs to me that Pazhè being rather quiet might do better with Zínibel, who's more talkative. Atírin seems a bit on the quiet side himself."

Pazhè stopped whetting the axe momentarily, stricken by her father's words. She forced herself to keep working, while listening apprehensively and all the more intently.

"You think that being different in this way, they may find each other more interesting?" her mother said.

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"Well, I just wouldn't want them to sit in silence in their house all winter. It might soon wear thin, even lead to troubles."

"But when they are alone together, how they feel about each other may be more important than how much idle talk they make."

"Now I surely do see where you're going with this," Buri said testily. "I'm not blind. I see how they look at each other."

"I just want to consider everything. And yes, I see what you see. I think Pazhè and Atírin are in love."

Pazhè stopped working, forgetting the half-sharpened axe, completely on edge now, and hanging on her father's next words. It seemed Buri was about to get angry, but then like a threatening storm cloud that instead drops gentle rain he laughed, and though Pazhè could not see him she could imagine him shaking his huge black mane.

"Now don't think I'm such a beast that I'd try to make my daughter marry someone she doesn't love, when she loves another," he said at last. "But ask yourself this: will it last? Young people can fall in and out of love pretty quickly. And if so they may be soon divorced. The love that grows over time may be stronger."

"True, but we must ask Pazhè who she prefers."

"Very well, and I think we both know what she'll say. I just wish there were some way to be sure their love will last. Let's call her in."

At that Pazhè slid away from the window and ran to her shady spot where she plumped down again, trying to act as if she had heard nothing, though her heart thumped madly and her head felt light. A moment later she heard her parents calling her from the doorway.

Two days later, toward noon, Púnaman returned to his father's house. The day was sunny but cool, with blue skies and few clouds, and a steady breeze had been blowing in from the north across the Lake, stirring up rippling waves on its usually placid waters. Púnaman had been walking some time, but he arrived seeming flushed by more than just exertion.

He found his mother and sister at home, tanning a hide with willow bark to make a cream-colored wedding dress for Pazhè. "I gave Arkem and Magor your message," he breathlessly told Tergel, with an uneasy glance at Pazhè, "and they've accepted your invitation." Pazhè knew this had been for a meal at which her parents and Atírin's would discuss the marriage. But why was Púnaman so distraught?

"Well and good," Tergel said. "But you seem out of sorts. Is something wrong?"

"I don't know. You see, I was on the way home," Púnaman began, "when I met Zínibel."

Pazhè looked up at her brother, but now he avoided her eye. Their mother spoke gently. "What happened?"

"Zínibel called out to me: 'Good morning, Púnaman,' with a big smile, and pointed to the fishing creel he had with him and said: 'I have here another gift for your parents. A big trout I caught in the Morákim this morning. Let's go together to your father's house.'"

"Well I didn't know what to say at first, so at last I just told him as respectfully as I could that I didn't think he would be wanting to give my parents any more gifts, as I had just been to the house of Arkem and invited him and Magor to eat at my father's house in three days' time.

"Zínibel knew right away what that meant. He looked very unhappy but all he said was that he would not be walking with me today and that he and his parents would be eating the trout, not me and mine after all. He sounded

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as unhappy as he looked but seemed to be trying hard to not let it show.

"I said I was sorry to have to be the one to tell him, and then to try to make him feel better I told him he'd surely find another bride, that maybe there was someone in Paltóvek."

"I don't think so," Tergel said, "unless he's willing to wait a year or two." Paltóvek was the nearest neighboring village, and her mother would have known about such things, Pazhè felt sure, since it was less than half a day's journey away and many in Káragir had kin there. Tergel went on. "But there may be someone in one of the other villages around the Lake, or in the Valley or the River-mouths or at Kózhover, if he can wait to find out who might be available when people start visiting and trading in the summer."

"Well, I didn't think to say that," Púnaman admitted. "I just told him he'd surely find someone, and that maybe he could get Kunánè to divine who to ask, or maybe the witches at Sálamay. But I saw I was only making things worse, the way he looked at me, so I said goodbye at last. He turned around and stalked back toward the village the way he had come, and I went the other way quick as I could."

Pazhè felt terrible. She hadn't wanted to hurt Zinibel, but she wanted Atírin so. Her mother frowned.

"I can hardly blame him for being upset," she said, returning her attention to the tanning pot. "There's no way to make everyone happy. I just hope he'll get over it. And he'll find a bride if he's willing to wait."

The midday sun shone through the leaves of a gnarled oak tree upon three people, two men and a woman, sitting by a great stone in the shadow of the oak. The stone, an immense mass of dark basalt nearly as tall as a man and twice as broad as it was high, had once been rectangular, but its corners had been worn down by countless years of wind and rain and it had cracked in half, the break running roughly diagonally across it. It lay partly buried in the ground and at a slight angle, with the two halves offset, one resting slightly higher than the other and pushed some inches sideways by the roots of the ancient oak.

The two men intently studied one face of the stone, on which traces of carving showed: a multitude of tiny linear figures, ordered in rows and columns. The woman sat a little further away, saying nothing, but listening and watching.

"I cannot understand them, Master," the younger of the two men, a young man with close-cropped hair and glinting eyes, was saying. "Many of the signs are unknown to me, and the ones I know do not seem to be used as you have taught me."

"That is because I have taught you to use them in our tongue," the older man replied. About forty, he had same look in his eyes as the younger man, but more so; his glance had a disturbing light in it. A shock of wispy, greying hair behind a receding hairline accentuated the size of his head compared to his small, wiry frame. "The Primordial Ones will reveal to you the secret of understanding these signs in their forgotten tongue when you are ready."

The two men stood up, and now the woman spoke. "Master!" she called.

"What is it?" the elder man said.

"Churik approaches with a stranger."

Both men came around the side of the great stone, passing the woman, who rose too and followed them. The three halted not far away and awaited the two men who came walking toward them across a cobble-strewn open stretch within the sparsely wooded hollow.

"This person wishes to speak with you, Master," one of the newcomers said, a young man with a bow and a quiver of arrows over his shoulder and a net full of fish in his hand. "He says he comes in friendship, and we have exchanged arrows."

"I am Zínibel," said the stranger, a short, stocky youth in a yellow tunic and likewise bearing a bow and quiver. "You are the leader of these people?"

"I am Dahlor Magman," the elder man said. "I am their Master. What brings you here?"

"I've come to trade with you, Dahlor Magman," Zínibel said. "Or I should say to exchange gifts with you, if you'll agree to it. But I must first tell you something of my difficulty now."

"Speak," Dahlor Magman said. "I will hear you out."

"I've been courting a maiden named Pazhè for two months, wishing to marry her, but I learned yesterday that her parents have betrothed her to a youth named Atírin. So I would have you use your magic to get Pazhè for me. She's a maiden of eighteen summers and very beautiful — slender, with long, fine hair parted in the middle and remarkable eyes..."

Zínibel went on, extolling Pazhè's beauty. Dahlor Magman listened, showing every sign of interest, but soon began looking equally vexed. "She was gangly and awkward until a year or so ago when she suddenly blossomed, yet she still acts just as shy as before," Zínibel was saying, when Dahlor Magman interrupted him to address his followers.

"Sharsil," he told the woman, "you and Churik go prepare those fish. Táatakun," he said to the short-haired young man who had been studying the great stone with him, "go with them and wait — I'll join you when the food is ready."

The three bowed their heads and hastened to obey, departing together a short way through the trees to their camp, where they did just as Dahlor Magman had bidden them. But before long he called out for Sharsil. When she returned, a leather bag lay open on the ground between Dahlor Magman and Zínibel, revealing nuggets of copper and bits of silver and gold within. "That's how you get to Tosázhi Dunes," Zínibel was saying. "She's going there tomorrow to pick tarragon."

"That is certain?" Dahlor Magman interjected.

"One of the girls said so. Tomorrow is the third full moon of spring, which they say is the first good day for gathering tarragon. And they'll need some for this dinner her parents have invited Atírin's to — and for the wedding feast," Zínibel added sourly. "You'll recognize her as she'll be wearing a buff-colored doeskin kirtle."

"Sharsil," Dahlor Magman said when Zínibel paused, "take his gift to me back to our camp." He indicated the bag on the ground.

"There is much copper hereabout," Zínibel said. "And quite a bit of gold and silver comes by trade — my father gets a lot. I hear there is none elsewhere in Armágin, except what goes by trade, so that these will surely be worth much when you return to the Coast."

"They will," Dahlor Magman replied. "I and these apprentices of mine have traveled over most of Armágin, so I know that you are quite right that no metal is found anywhere except here in the north. Enough copper gets

traded south that people do not lack for tools, but little silver or gold is seen."

Sharsil had picked up the bag of metal and tied it closed, and now addressed Dahlor Magman deferentially. "We have cleaned and skewered the fish and are ready to cook them as soon as you are done speaking, Master."

"Very well, I'll be there in a moment," Dahlor Magman told Sharsil, and then addressed Zínibel. "Will you join us for our meal?"

"No, thank you, I must head north right away to be home before dark."

"As you wish," said Dahlor Magman. "But come by nightfall tomorrow. I will have the gift you desire then."

"I'll come. But before you take those, two things," Zínibel said quickly, indicating the bag Sharsil held, and then his voice broke as he continued, with his head up and chin forward. "First, I must be blameless in the eyes of people in Káragir."

"So it shall seem," Dahlor Magman answered. Sharsil, after having begun to withdraw, had halted a short distance away and stood watching.

"Good. Now show me some of your magic, so I can be sure you can do what you say," said Zínibel.

"Very well," Dahlor Magman replied gravely. And then he suddenly grew to immense size, until he towered over both the gawking Zínibel and the great dark stone beside them, taller than the oak. "Is this proof enough of my might?" Dahlor Magman's voice boomed, as Zínibel fell to the ground and cowered beneath the giant figure.

Sharsil too had recoiled at first but now stood quietly by, knowing this as but the least exercise to her Master. Zínibel had begun crawling away and now scrambled to his feet and stumbled off the way he had come.

"Remember, be here at nightfall tomorrow," Dahlor Magman called after him, standing there as before, with a leer on his face.

"I'll be there!" Zínibel shouted back, without turning, and sped on his way.

Chapter 2

When Pazhè and three younger girls from Káragir came to Tosázhi Dunes late the next morning they found a grandmother from Paltóvek and her two granddaughters already there. Pazhè, in her buff doeskin kirtle and a broad-brimmed straw hat, stayed by the old woman and gossiped, picking tarragon while the grandam sat and talked. Looking up at whiles, Pazhè scanned the lakeshore, the forest edge, and the low, rolling dunes between. These were partly overgrown by grasses on their sheltered inland slopes, and primroses, cinquefoil, anemones and bearberries as well as tarragon grew behind them, well back from the sandy shore. Then the forest began, extending south, east, and west to the horizon.

The others remained in view and no wild beasts emerged from the forest. Pazhè felt it her task to keep watch, as the eldest from Káragir and soon to be a woman married. The grandam seemed more relaxed but had surely done this many times and the dunes lay scarcely a quarter-day's walk from either village. Meanwhile the younger girls talked and laughed as they filled their bags and baskets, under a sun shining bright and warm in a sky blue and clear.

Declaring that her granddaughters had gathered enough, the grandam rose, and she and they said farewell and then headed home along a westward shoreline path. Shortly after, a small boat appeared on the lake, skirting along the shore from the east. As it drew near Pazhè saw two youths in it, Atírin and his friend Per. They paddled in

to the shore and Atírin disembarked. Pazhè hurried down to meet him.

"I'm going to say hello to Pazhè and the girls and sit with them awhile," she heard him telling Per, whose round face lit with a smile.

"Oh of course," Per laughed. "If I'd guessed why you wanted to come this way, I'd have made you walk! In fact, maybe you ought to walk back."

"No," Atírin said. "We left together, we should return together."

"Very well, I'll fish in the cove and come back. Or you can walk over there if you're quick saying hello, though Pazhè might change her mind about things if you are."

With that and a friendly wave to Pazhè and the girls, who must have seen the boat arrive but Pazhè hoped hadn't heard the exchange, Per steered the dugout back out onto the lake and paddled on westward.

Atírin now joined Pazhè, who felt her mouth curling into a shy smile. They crossed the beach and climbed up the dunes toward where the girls dawdled at their herb-gathering. Atírin called out to them in greeting and they called back with much laughter and jesting, both to him and to Pazhè, making her lower her head to hide her blush. He maintained his poise a little better, waving dismissively toward the girls with a somewhat forced-sounding laugh, and turned his eyes to Pazhè.

"I'm glad to see you," she said, closing her full gathering bag and pulling it over her shoulder by its thong. "Did you just chance by here?"

He shook his head, smiling and now blushing a bit himself. "No, I didn't, but my father took our boat up the Morákim today, so I talked Per into taking his family's boat out onto the lake."

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They went together to the edge of the woods, where they sat on the trunk of a fallen spruce and spoke softly while the three girls continued picking tarragon. The girls' attention soon shifted from Pazhè and Atírin back to their own talk. The two then rose quietly, and taking each other's hands passed under the trees of the forest.

But the three girls were not the only ones to have witnessed Atírin's arrival. Watchful eyes, unbeknownst to Atírin, Pazhè, or any of the others on the dunes, had been trained upon them from within the thickly tangled boughs of the trees at the forest's edge, some eighty yards from where the two lovers had sat before slipping away. These four pairs of eyes watched with attention that had not wavered since Pazhè and the girls from Káragir had joined the folk from Paltóvek.

The eyes belonged to Dahlor Magman, his apprentices Táatakun and Sharsil, and another man called Lamnar. Standing silently just to her Master's left and slightly behind, Sharsil directed her gaze to follow his, as shown by the cant of his head. Táatakun would be doing the same while Lamnar kept a broader lookout, obeying the last whispered order the Master had given him upon reaching Tosázhi Dunes. Alert to all activity there, however commonplace, Sharsil also remained equally attentive to Dahlor Magman, waiting for him to signal his command, as she knew the other two would be waiting.

As they watched quietly, the intermittent sounds of the forest, of birds crying and insects buzzing, became distinct. Only Dahlor Magman had broken silence, muttering an unintelligible exclamation when the doeskin-clad maiden

had first appeared. Saying nothing further, his gaze had then followed her fixedly.

When the two youths in the boat had appeared and one had come ashore, Dahlor Magman's tension had become marked. He had motioned his people to complete silence and had begun scrutinizing what was happening on the dunes even more intently, as the maiden and the newcomer had greeted each other and then gone to sit together on the fallen tree. There the two could still be glimpsed after a slight shift of the watchers' position, a moment or two of crackling amid the branches around them and crunching on the carpet of fallen larch needles beneath their feet, sounds which had seemed loud in the stillness. Dahlor Magman had yet said nothing, but the muscles of his neck and jaw had grown taut and those in his cheek toward Sharsil had twitched as the maiden and youth sat speaking quietly, too far away to be overheard by the witch and his three apprentices.

When the two stood and moved under the trees, Dahlor Magman finally spoke. "That's Pazhè," he said quietly, as to himself, still visibly anxious. "That's the kirtle Zinibel spoke of, and all else about her is as he said. And that youth must be the rival who he named Atírin." He mused a moment, frowning. "I think I shall put a stop to this right now," he then said. He moved forward, pushing his way very deliberately through the branches, and took a few steps beyond the trees. There he halted and lowered his head, standing in quiet concentration.

The spot Pazhè and Atírin had found was well shaded by the trees, though the girls on the dunes could just still be glimpsed. But so rapt were they both upon each other in

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their lovemaking that some time passed before they became aware that the sky had grown dark.

"Atírin," Pazhè said, seeing this first. "I think there may be rain on the way."

"What?" he said, looking up from their warm embrace, and then he paused in surprise at the sudden change in the sky. Through the branches above they could see that heavy grey clouds had rolled in to cover the entire sky.

"Well at least it hasn't started raining yet," Atírin said, putting his arm around Pazhè, who had sat up on the bed of larch needles, supporting herself on her hands.

"It's not raining yet, but I think we'd best not stay long," she said softly to him, bringing her face close to his. "I wouldn't want to get caught here in the rain."

"Nobody likes that," Atírin agreed. "But at least we could shelter under the trees here together."

"True enough," Pazhè said laughing. "But the girls would come here and join us so it wouldn't be quite the same."

"Ah, well, maybe you're right about that," Atírin said. "I suppose we'd best go." He stood and gave her his hand, helping her to her feet. They dusted the larch needles off of themselves and started getting ready to go back out onto the dunes.

Then a voice cried out from an uncertain direction, neither very near nor very far, calling Atírin's name.

"Did you hear that?" he asked Pazhè.

"Yes, I think I did hear something. It sounded like someone calling out for you, Atírin, but it didn't sound like one of the girls."

"No, you're right, it didn't," Atírin said. "I think it was a man. Maybe it was Per, maybe the dark sky brought him back."

He went over and, parting the branches of the trees with a rustle, looked out across the open dunes. There one girl remained at her task, working rapidly, while the other two now sat talking and looking worriedly up at the sky. Neither Per nor his boat could be seen, though the beach and the lake beyond were mostly hidden by the dunes.

"Well, I don't know," Pazhè said, looking over Atírin's shoulder. "I don't see him."

"Neither do I," Atírin said. "But I think I'd better go have a closer look. Wait here if you want or go join the girls. You could get them ready to go. I don't know if everybody will fit in Per's boat, but we'll see."

"It might be quicker than walking home," Pazhè said.

"True, though I wouldn't want to get caught out on the Lake in a bad storm. Anyhow, I'll be back in a bit."

With that Atírin emerged from the trees and walked out toward the dunes. He climbed the grassy landward slope of the nearest dune, and the girls caught sight of him and called to him. He waved curtly and then descended the shoreward slope. Pazhè caught another brief glimpse of him going westward along the shore, and then lost sight of him between the scrubby hillocks and the green of the forest, which met the shoreline just beyond the stretch of dunes.

Pazhè finished arranging her clothing and adjusted her bead necklace. She put the thong of her gathering bag back over her shoulder and prepared to go out and join the other girls bareheaded, her hat forgotten on the ground now that the sun was hidden. As she emerged from the woods, she heard a sound off to her left, a footfall breaking a dry, fallen branch, and turned to see Atírin only a short distance away, approaching just beyond the fringe of the trees. She stopped, feeling more than a little surprised, and he walked calmly over to her.

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"Where did you go?" she asked. "You came back very quickly."

"Oh," Atírin said, "I just cut back around through the trees. Come with me now, this way, back the way I just came."

Puzzled, she none the less followed him as he made his way back along the edge of the woods. Atírin led the way, staying a few paces ahead of Pazhè, saying nothing, which puzzled her even more. Still, he looked all right. Or did he? Was there something a little odd about his manner? She couldn't be sure. As she wondered about this, he halted, parted the branches of the trees on their left, and indicated with a nod of his head for her to pass back into the woods ahead of him. She glimpsed another small clearing just inside the forest and after a moment's hesitation stepped toward it. Behind her she heard his footsteps crunching on the larch needles.

Suddenly she became aware that other people stood amongst the low green-neededled boughs where she hadn't seen them before. She wheeled to face Atírin. He fixed her with a hard, cold gaze. With him were three strangers, two men and a woman. Suddenly she saw that it wasn't Atírin, but someone else — a small, wiry man in a brown tunic, with shining eyes fixed intently on hers.

Hands seized her. She screamed.

Per and Atírin paddled the boat toward Tosázhi Dunes, this time coming from the west. Atírin glanced up at the clear blue sky. The sudden change puzzled him, partly because he could not say quite when the sky had cleared, only that it had again been bright, blue and nearly cloudless from horizon to horizon once he had gotten out of sight of

Tosázhi Dunes. Per's assurance, when Atírin had reached the cove where his friend had been fishing, that it had been that way all along and that he had been there the whole time both added to the puzzle.

They came within sight of the dunes and Atírin looked to shore. No one was visible.

"Where are they?" Atírin wondered anxiously.

"They might just be behind the dunes where we can't see them," Per offered.

"Pazhè! Pazhè! Are you there?" Atírin called out. No answer came. He turned to Per. "Let's go ashore and take a look around."

"Alright," Per said, and they paddled in to the surf, disembarked, and hauled the dugout up onto the shore. Per waited near the boat while Atírin went up onto the dunes, still calling Pazhè's name. But still no answer came, and Atírin found himself standing alone, gazing forlornly across the empty, windswept space. Pazhè and the girls had vanished.

"Could they have gone home already?" Per asked, joining him.

"I suppose," Atírin replied. "But other strange things have happened today, like that voice calling me."

Per had shrugged that off when Atírin had first told him of it, after climbing into the boat with him back at the cove, but now he rubbed his jaw thoughtfully before replying. "Someone hunting in the forest?" he suggested finally.

"Perhaps, but we should look around more."

Learning to track well was a matter of pride among Arbir youths, and together Atírin and Per, and betimes Zinibel too, had spent much time at it. The two soon spotted a jumble of tracks heading back toward the trail to

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Káragir, tracks of a size with those that Pazhè and the girls had made arriving and in places covering them.

"You're right," Atírin said. "They've gone home. But why didn't Pazhè wait for me?"

"Well, you said the sky looked bad. Maybe she didn't want to be left out alone in a storm, and they all went with whoever it was that called out to you."

Atírin said nothing, vexed and bereft of a better explanation. "Well, I'd better go back with you," he said at last. Per had a perch in his creel back in the boat, which he needed to bring home fresh, and Atírin doubted he could overtake Pazhè and the others on foot. The two returned to the beach and together pushed the boat back onto the water, climbed in, and began paddling eastward.

"It is more than passing strange about the weather today," Atírin said after a short time, unable to shake an uneasy feeling. "I've seen it cloud up quick, although it's unusual for it to happen that quick, but I've never seen it clear again so fast."

"Or be cloudy one place and clear another place nearby," Per added. "It is very strange." Neither voiced the suspicion, which as Arbir people they surely felt, that the sky spirit had manifested itself for some reason or upon some whim unknown.

The eyes of the strange man Pazhè had somehow taken for Atírin had gazed directly and balefully into hers, her struggles had ceased, and the two men beside her had bound her hands. What followed she had perceived only vaguely, as the strangers had led her unresisting along a forest trail. For an indeterminate time she had walked in a daze, heeding not whether she trod strange or familiar

paths. When her mind began to clear she tried to speak, making only inarticulate sounds.

The strangers halted. "Give her water, Sharsil," said a man with an unfamiliar accent, and a water-skin appeared before Pazhè, from which she drank thirstily. She inhaled some and coughed, and the water-skin was pulled away.

"Who are you?" she gasped, in rising fear. "Where are you taking me?"

"I am Dahlor Magman," the man who had tricked her said. "I am taking you with me." He took the water-skin from the woman.

Pazhè pulled at her bonds. "*Help!*" she cried desperately.

"Tátakun, explain," Dahlor Magman said, and as he began to drink nodded to one of the men beside Pazhè. The man tugged hard at her bonds, hurting her so that she cried out.

"We've come far enough that no one will hear you," declared the other one beside her, a cropped-headed young man. "But we will gag you if you keep up your caterwauling, and if you do not go willingly, we can tie you up and carry you!"

While the others drank Pazhè stood sobbing. She kept sobbing when they resumed walking, marching on numbly as her tears ran dry, in growing weariness. Dahlor Magman ordered only a few brief halts for more water, and if she flagged the man holding the lead extending from her bonds, whom the others called Lamnar, forced her onward with another rough jerk. Late in the afternoon they descended into a shallow basin where the trees stood more sparsely amid patches of cobbles, gravel, and sand, and tussocks of tall grass. Pazhè knew not where she was, only that they had come a long way south.

Her captors led her to three summerhouses, lean-to shelters like those she and her mother stayed in overnight when working in a far garden all one day and the next. Here a lanky young woman tending the embers of a fire rose and greeted Pazhè's captors. Dahlor Magman spoke with her briefly. Using sticks as tongs she then dropped hot stones from the embers into a makeshift birch bark container full of greens and water, and then strode away across the basin.

"See that she does not run away," Dahlor Magman told Tátakun, indicating Pazhè.

Assenting, Tátakun took a coil of stout cordage from a pack. "Sit down," he told Pazhè. She slowly obeyed. To her further distress, for escape at the first chance had been her intent, he tied one end of the cord around her foot and the other around an upright post of one of the summerhouses.

Her captors sat down and drank from a water-skin they passed around. Pazhè, whose hands remained bound behind her, was given a long drink from it by the woman called Sharsil. Pazhè guessed her age at thirty; she seemed the oldest of the group, save Dahlor Magman. Her shoulder-length black hair yet showed no grey, but furrows had formed on her brow and by her sad, strange eyes.

With a wooden spoon Sharsil stirred the greens, adding a handful of tarragon from Pazhè's gathering bag. The others sat resting quietly. The young woman returned with another man, who had a net full of fish which she cleaned, skewered, and cooked. From the terse conversation, Pazhè learned that she was called Tuméles and he Churik, though she found it difficult to catch all that was said. Glancing around, Pazhè found Sharsil sitting nearby watching her.

"What are you going to do with me?" Pazhè asked.

"Better not to talk or ask questions," Sharsil said quietly. "Dahlor Magman will tell you when he chooses."

Pazhè fell silent again, deeply fearful about her fate. Being dragged off so could only bode very badly for her. Were these enemies of her village, her family? Pazhè didn't know. As far as she knew, there were no feuds now between kindreds or villages around the Lake. But these people did not speak like those around the Lake; clearly they were Arbir, but of another tribe. Recalling Kunánè's admonition and today's occurrences she guessed who her captors must be, yet why had they abducted her? She strained for a reason.

Finally the greens and fish were ready. On Dahlor Magman's order Sharsil untied Pazhè's hands, and then on improvised birch-bark platters everyone received some fish and a helping of burdock leaves. The tarragon gave it good flavor but Pazhè could hardly enjoy it, fear and worry quelling her appetite despite her hunger.

After the meal the water-skin went around again. The sun, now very low in the west, cast a red light through the trees. Suddenly Dahlor Magman glanced up, looking toward the darkening east.

"Ah, here he comes," he said.

Pazhè looked over and saw a man in a dusky-red cloak and yellow tunic approaching. To her surprise she recognized Zínibel. What was he doing here, she wondered, could this be rescue? His expression and manner seemed unsure.

"Greetings, Zínibel," said Dahlor Magman.

"Greetings, Dahlor Magman," said Zínibel. Pazhè felt surprise again, and some foreboding, seeing that they apparently knew each other. What could this possibly mean?

"You must be hungry and thirsty from your journey," Dahlor Magman said. "We have food left, and water too. Come, have some."

"Thank you," Zínibel said. "I will." He doffed his cloak and quiver and sat down. After taking a long drink he accepted the last of the fish and the burdock, while Dahlor Magman stepped aside with Táatakun. Pazhè wanted to speak to Zínibel, to beg his help, but dared not with her captors all around. She would have to wait her chance. Meanwhile Zínibel ate.

"You will not return to Káragir tonight, I think," Dahlor Magman said, returning as Zínibel finished.

"No," Zínibel said, "it's too far. I'll take her back in the morning." Pazhè's unlikely hope began to revive; perhaps he would bargain for her freedom.

"Then you will stay here," Dahlor Magman said with a smile.

Zínibel nodded in assent and drank more water. Churik, Táatakun, and Lamnar kindled six long torches from the fire and went off a short distance through the trees, where Pazhè now glimpsed a low, massive, squarish stone beneath an ancient oak. They planted the torches around the stone and then Táatakun returned, while the other two remained waiting just outside the circle of torchlight.

"All is ready," Táatakun said. Dahlor Magman nodded, and then Zínibel spoke.

"Now, to keep your side of our bargain, you must do something about the questions people in Káragir will ask if I go back with Pazhè now," Zínibel said anxiously, with a sly glance over at her that told her this was neither rescue nor ransom, but complicity. Hope vanished, leaving her lost and forsaken.

"That will not be a problem, trust me," Dahlor Magman said. "The others on the dunes saw just what I wanted them to. Have I not shown you that I am a man of power? And a man of knowledge, which is much the same thing? I have these from long study of the relics of the

Primordial Ones, having travelled throughout Armágin for this."

"Who are the Primordial Ones?" Zínibel asked.

"Those who came first, before the Arbir, the Hill People, or the Forest People. At Zhémkivir, our dwelling place on the great eastern Ocean, they left many shaped and graven stones like this one here. But eleven more such stones are scattered singly about Armágin. We have visited all of them now; the one here at Sálanay is the last. Most are worn smooth, but like this one four have traces of the Primordial Ones' carvings. I have now examined all these and learned what the stones speak, for the carvings do still speak the words of the Primordial Ones. And I now understand why the Primordial Ones carved these. Come, I'll show you."

Dahlor Magman led Zínibel forward, toward the torchlit swath around the stone. Pazhè could see apprehension on Zínibel's face, though he followed. Tátakun came behind.

The two women remained with Pazhè, seated to either side just behind her. Tuméles had put more wood on the fire and it flickered redly. The sun was down, twilight fading, and the circles of firelight in the camp and of torchlight around the great stone provided most of the illumination. But the full moon was rising, casting another light — white, pale and ghostly — across the darkening scene.

Through the trees Pazhè saw the three men approach the massive stone, joining the two waiting there. Dahlor Magman indicated the carved side of the stone to Zínibel, and seemed to be expounding on it, though she could not hear what he said. Then Zínibel looked up, and in the torchlight Pazhè saw his face contort with sudden fear. Dahlor Magman signaled with his hand and his three men

emerged from the shadows to seize Zínibel. They bound him, despite his cries and frantic kicking and thrashing, and then hauled him up atop the stone, where Dahlor Magman joined them. From the sheath at his belt he drew a knife, glinting red in the torchlight and rising moonlight.

The three apprentices held the writhing Zínibel, now piteously screaming "*Mercy! Mercy!!!*"

Dahlor Magman put the knife to Zínibel's throat, cut, and a torrent of blood gushed spurting out onto the dark stone. Dahlor Magman's three men then hung Zínibel upside down, tying his feet to the overhanging bough of the oak tree, and let his blood drain down upon the stone.

Pazhè wept, her face buried in her hands.

No sleep came to her after, lying exhausted between the two other women in the shelter, in mute desperation, overcome by fear and horror. The cord remained tied around her foot. Thence it ran to the post beneath Sharsil, who had positioned herself to leave enough slack in the cord for Pazhè to go some thirty feet from the shelter if need be, but no more without waking her.

On the other side lay Tuméles. Both women had been silent during the slaughter of Zínibel, and afterward Sharsil's face had been blank, as though inured to cruelty, but Tuméles had looked almost pleased, in a way that would have sickened Pazhè had she not already been so numbed by what she had seen. The expressions of the four men had been like Tuméles's, their manner animated, and Dahlor Magman had seemed elated.

Pazhè lay still for some time. The full moon rose higher, its wan light dimly illuminating the scene, save for the shadows of the scattered trees. She eventually heard people breathing deeply and regularly, then snores, and felt sure that everyone had fallen asleep.

She lifted herself up, looking long and carefully at the women on either side of her, ascertaining that they were both indeed fast asleep now. She sat up and began working on the knot around her ankle, but it proved too intricate to unravel, and after some time she concluded that she was tightening rather than loosening it. She moved as far as the cord allowed onto a cobblestone-strewn open space beyond the camp, to her discomfort somewhat nearer to the stone with the grisly shape hanging over it.

Among the cobbles she sought for something that could cut the bonds from around her leg, but to her disappointment found no sharp fragments. She considered striking two cobbles together to make one in the old way that her people remembered though now seldom used, though it was said still to be the way of the Hill People and the people up the Mágakar River beyond the Valley, but fear of making noise made her refrain in frustration.

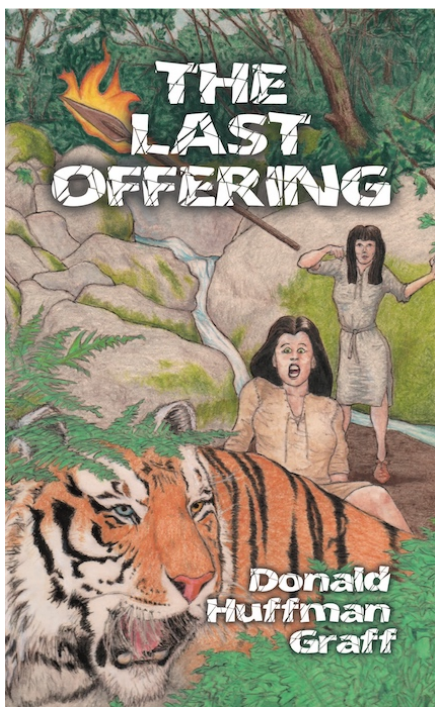
Something moved nearby. She looked up. In the moonlight three figures were moving around the big stone. They at first seemed almost to be figures of men, being man-sized, but she quickly saw this was not so. Misshapen, bald heads glistened a pallid grayish-green in the moonlight, atop long, wattled necks rising from shoulders curiously narrow and malformed, lean arms ended in clawed hands, and what she first took for some sort of close-fitting clothing she realized must be their naked, scaly hides. Below she glimpsed legs bending wrong and long, sinuous tails extending behind.

Their faces she could not see at first, but then, as they passed around the squat stone, one turned toward her to gaze up over its shoulder, revealing a skull-like visage out of nightmare, with incised nostrils, rows of sharp teeth in a wide, lipless mouth, and eyes glinting yellow around pupils like black slits. The thing fixed these not on her,

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mercifully, nor the moon, but at something else in a part of the sky where Pazhè, glancing quickly up, could see nothing but emptiness.

The two other creatures stopped and gazed up as the first one had. A cloud rolled across the face of the moon and darkness engulfed the whole scene. Pazhè began slinking slowly back toward the shelter. Moving in the dark she knocked a cobble into another, making a clatter that seemed deafening. She stopped still, fearing more that she might have drawn the attention of the creatures, whatever they were, than that she might have awakened her captors. Her heart pounding, she held motionless in the darkness.



With a web of dark spells the sorcerer Dahlor Magman had ensnared the maiden Pazhè. The hunter Atírin would dare anything to free her -- but would even a witch challenge the mightiest mage in the lost land of Armágin? And as a forgotten evil from the deeps of time wakes, madness looms for those who seek its power and those who resist alike.

The Last Offering

by Donald Huffman Graff

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