

The Year of the Horses:
A Myth of the Last Generation
by
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It would be a perfect day to die.

Last Dancer knew it was so as the end of his watch drew near. He knew from the way the night sky turned to liquid obsidian waiting to welcome the dawn. He knew because the prophets had foretold it. Soon the circumference of the sun would touch the tip of Castlarean Mountain and One Who Waits would take Last Dancer's place to watch over the people on this, the last day of their lives.

Dawn silvered the figure of Last Dancer as he sat cross-legged in the dirt, his face turned toward the mountains. He pictured the way it would be, tomorrow and for all the tomorrows. The mountains would stand: granite, gravel, layer upon layer of history. But no future, no life. Never again would human voice echo through the canyons. In solitude, the mountains would mourn

their passing just as they had mourned the slow extinction of all the ground walkers, the sky dwellers, those that slide on bellies and even earth borers when they could no longer burrow within the compacted dust which once was soil.

Last Dancer knew of these things only through the stories of the prophets. He had learned them as a babe. They were his father's voice and his mother's lullabies. They sweetened the milk he drank from spiny senita stems and gave flavor to the fireweed root. For all of his life, Last Dancer had been preparing for this day.

As he had tried to prepare the others. He could hear them now: muted voices, the footfall of someone making their way to the midden trench, stirring among the meager leavings of past generations. In Last Dancer's youth, there might have been the cry of a child, but none had been born since the year of seven fires.

When the sunrise rounded the shoulders of the mountain peak, Last Dancer grew weary. The day before them weighed heavily on him. His eyes closed, but opened again quickly as the visions pressed at him. It is not time yet, he told them. You must wait.

The sun reached the peak and the shadow of a lone saguaro reached its arms for Last Dancer. He was strengthened by the embrace. He heard One Who Waits approach, felt her touch on his

shoulder, then he breathed a prayer to the morning for the last time and arose. They greeted one another with a gripping of shoulders and looked into each others' eyes. The face of One Who Waits held a peace he had never seen before, not even on the faces of the other members of The Circle.

He jerked a quick nod to her and hurried away, eager now to embrace his visions. During the night's ceremony, the others had each been shown the way that they would take after their death, alone and in silence. But Last Dancer, as Sramana Pi of The Circle, had been responsible for keeping watch, for keeping them all safe during the sacred ritual they had been preparing to perform for generations. His was the last path yet to be mapped. And then they could begin their journeys.

His tent was empty, his sleeping bag still rolled and tied with his pack leaning nearby. Squatting, the green slope of canvas brushing his hair, he tied closed the tent flap and traced, by habit, the symbols painted in white on the axis of the triangular door. First, two bends in a river, one that turned back on itself--**U**--and the other that wandered--**S**. The four trails that followed the river had so worn with time the white paint had crumbled from most of the fabric threads, but Last Dancer remembered their shapes--**A, R, M, Y**.

He sat on the roll of sleeping bag and opened his pack with the same eagerness he had once picked cereus blossoms to feed the

young ones, and the old. He grew impatient with his face cleansing, but was careful not to deviate from the pattern. Each streak of color was smeared away with oil in the opposite order it had been painted on his face. He spoke the rites of cleansing quickly, but missed not one syllable nor mispronounced even one sound. He must not break the web now, not after they had come so far. He could feel the ancients watching him, hear them say, go slowly, take care, it is not too late for the Wise One to change your course.

Finally, he was ready. With a pause as natural as it was dramatic, he reached within the pack and withdrew a battered tin carefully wrapped in a cloth brown with age. Last Dancer had never opened his box of dreams before, it had been forbidden, yet he knew what it held: a dried mànà leaf, a plant that had ceased to exist long before the memories of those left alive began. Each babe ever born had received their sacred packet: a box, a jar, a cloth bag sealed with wax.

"*Sre lalan, Sre tonkan, Sre madro,*" he prayed as he pulled the box open with cracked, age-worn fingers. The lid resisted, its hinges nearly rendered useless from ages of slumber. The scraping of metal on metal rewarded his efforts with the sight of a small, perfect leaf, half as long as his thumb and wide as a fingernail. The veins that had once fed life through the growing

plant still traced the now brown petal. Waiting to give new life to Last Dancer.

The others had already tasted their life beneath the rounded face of the ritual moon last night. This, therefore, was the last remaining mànà leaf in the land. Just as they were the last remaining peoples. When he swallowed the leaf, it would be as if he had swallowed all of humankind.

The mànà felt dry and brittle on his tongue. He closed his mouth and the leaf crushed into innumerable particles, each particle immediately beginning to tell its tale, to teach its lesson.

Last Dancer's eyes grew heavy. His body began to spin circles around his heart, faster, faster, faster. His ears filled with a high-pitched sound like yet unlike the cry of a human voice: *Eyie-ie-ie-ie-ie*. The spinning sensation stopped with a heavy thud in his heart and his lungs would not hold air no matter how deeply he breathed.

And then they came. The horses. He heard them first, their hooves pounding the dirt like a thousand drums, the whine of their neighing, the wind of their running. Then his tent disappeared and he saw a cloud of dust and, soon, the first of the band. They were magnificent: nostrils flaring with nobility, manes and tails whipping in the wind like a beautiful

maiden's hair, their flanks and shoulders rippling with the surge of their muscles.

Last Dancer stood and stumbled forward with outspread arms of joy. This, then, was their destiny. They would be as the horses, proud and glorious and free. He could see the others now, standing around the morning fire. He beckoned them to come with him, but they held back, afraid or confused, full of awe, and so he stood alone to greet their destiny. To greet the end of time.

Eyie-ie-ie-ie-ie. There came that sound again, tearing through the morning as the horses reached him, the forerunners weaving around him so closely he could feel the heat from their bodies, smell the scent of their sweat. Their energy moved in him, through him, until their energy was his.

"Last Dancer."

His name thundered loud above the drumming hooves. Mounted on a piebald stallion of magnificent proportions, a figure dressed in ribbons of light rode to where Last Dancer waited and reined the horse to a halt. Last Dancer fell to the ground, afraid to look up.

"Last Dancer, Sramana Pi of the Circle." The Wise One's words demanded that he look up, though the bright light nearly blinded him. Horses continued to race past them but their passing now made only a muted, distant rumble.

"Who are you that you seek to comprehend my ways?" the Wise One asked. "You yearn to see through my eyes when I have no eyes, to read my mind when I have no skull to house a brain. The messages I send through the prophets can only be heard through the finite form of your language. Seen with your limited vision. Only the tiniest trace of you can truly know me, and that speck is not you, but I.

"All is foolishness when you claim to know the ways of the Wise One. Seek not to understand. Seek to be."

With flashing heels, the piebald was spurred to a gallop. Last Dancer cried out with dismay and reached for the golden foot dangling in its stirrup, running beside the horse for a few stumbling steps before he fell, face down, in the trampled dirt.

The thunder of the horses returned in a tunnel of sound, over him, around him, through him. Last Dancer called out once, his arm stretched before him, then succumbed to his destiny beneath the relentless hooves of the horses.

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One Who Waits closed the eyes of Last Dancer and said a prayer of parting. As she stood, she saw in the smooth, untrampled earth surrounding the crumpled body of her friend, one lone mark. The Mark of the Pony. She pointed it out to the others. "Death will not come today." Even as the words left her

mouth, she could hear the spirit of Last Dancer whispering them in her ear.

Some walked away relieved, thinking that the prophets had been wrong. But One Who Waits knew better. Far easier to die with all the answers, than be left with only questions. Death *had* come, unrecognized.

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