

Light Horse Dark Horse

Book 3

The Soter Herd

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Book 3 of the Light Horse, Dark Horse series

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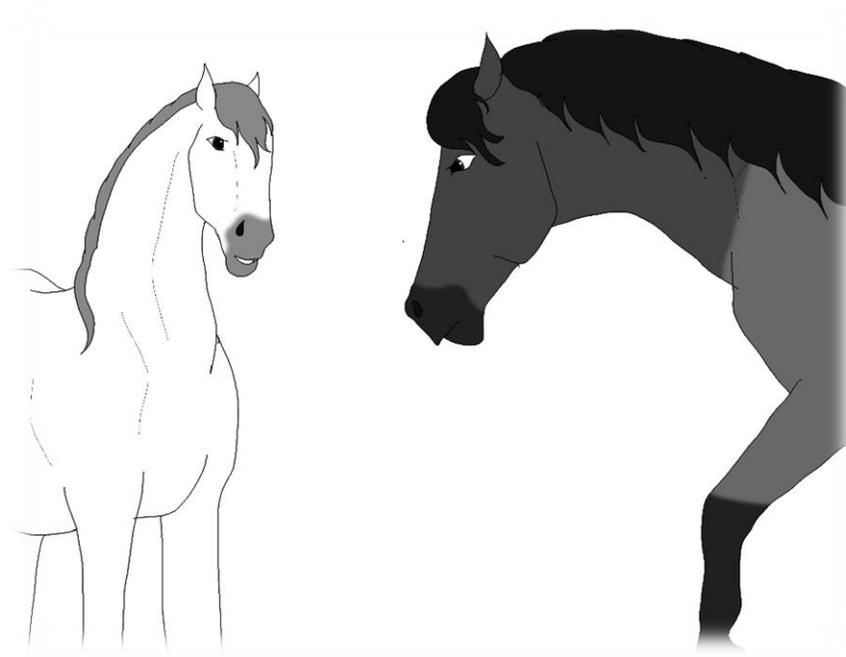
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Chapter 1

Waiting



The sun was shining brightly one warm summer morning in Great Plains, and the air was filled with the cheerful chirping of birds. Shadow's large herd of Mustangs grazed the lush green grass peacefully, as if there wasn't a care in the world. All except Stone, who was pacing back and forth nearby, snorting restlessly.

"What's taking so long?" the grullo stallion muttered as he finally stopped his pacing.

Lightning, one of Stone's friends and Shadow's light gray adopted son, lifted his head after swallowing a mouthful of grass.

"The Cloud Horse will be here, just as Soter promised," the light gray horse said to Stone. "We just have to wait."

"Well, I'm sick and tired of waiting!" Stone snapped with a stamp of his hoof.

Hearing the outburst, Sunspot, Thunder, Cobalt, and Apache lifted their heads and stared at Stone. Several mares in the herd did the same, wondering what the commotion was about. Noticing the others' puzzled looks, Stone ducked his head, lowering his ears in embarrassment.

"Sorry," he muttered.

Lightning smiled. "It's all right, Stone. You were just on edge." He glanced back at his companions. "We *all* are, in a sort of way."

Nearly a week and a half went by since their mentor and Leader, Soter— half-Son of Sierra and Shadow, and true Son of The Great Horse— returned to His heavenly home, the Paradise, as the rightful King of Equus after fulfilling the Prophecy of the Light Horse.

“It almost feels as if it was yesterday when Soter appeared to us,” Lightning finally said, thinking back to the time of Soter’s resurrection three days after His execution in the Lair of the Wolves.

Apache, the brown-and-white pinto, snorted humorlessly. “And to think that I doubted He could come back from the dead...”

Lightning’s steel gray twin brother, Thunder, gave Apache a friendly nudge on the shoulder. “Soter still forgave you, Apache, remember? Just as He forgave us for running away when He needed us.”

Presently, Cobalt asked, “Why us?”

The five of them turned to the usually quiet black horse.

“What do you mean?” Stone nickered.

“I mean...” Cobalt softly answered, “Have any of you wondered why— of all horses—Soter would pick the six of us as His apprentices?”

“There were *seven* of us,” Thunder corrected.

The six quieted with grim faces as they thought about Dusk, Soter’s foalhood friend from Shadow’s herd. He joined Soter’s small band until he eventually betrayed his Leader by turning Him in to King Wildfire. No one had seen or heard from Dusk again since that fateful day.

Stone shook his mane and pawed the ground with his hoof angrily. “I oughta pommel that traitor for his—”

“You know what Soter will say about violence,” Lightning interrupted. “*He who lives by violence will die by violence.*”

Chastised, Stone lowered his muzzle, grimacing.

“We need to forgive Dusk,” Lightning continued. “Soter told us to do so. Hating Dusk won’t change anything. Besides, if he hadn’t betrayed Soter, Soter wouldn’t have fulfilled the Prophecy with His death in the first place.”

The stallions took those words to heart with solemn nods. They understood that, somehow, The Great Horse had orchestrated the entire plan of Soter’s sacrifice. Even Soter knew that Dusk will betray Him from the very beginning, yet He still accepted him as his apprentice.

Apache decided to change the subject when he asked, “How will we know when the Cloud Horse will come?”

Stone grinned at his pinto friend. “Doubting again, Apache?”

“No!” Apache retorted with an irritated snort. “It was just a question!” He shook his mane with a snort. “Sheesh! Why do you always think I always doubt?!”

Stone laughed. “Relax! I was just teasing!”

The stallions were neighed in laughter, even Apache.

Lightning sighed, lowering his head slightly. “If only Silver were alive to see it happen.”

The horses became somber as they remembered their old friend, Silver. He was once Lightning and Thunder’s leader a long time ago, but he eventually lost his herd to a lone bachelor stallion. He was then accepted to King Wildfire’s Royal Herd. During Soter’s trial in King Wildfire’s territory, Silver was the only horse who defended Him, though he kept his loyalty a secret. Lightning and Thunder planned to tell their old friend about Soter’s resurrection, but he had already died two days after Soter left.

“Good morning,” a soft voice nickered.

The stallions turned to a young white mare approaching from the herd.

“Good morning, Dove,” they greeted in unison.

Dove is another one of Soter’s closest followers. Soter had healed her from a bizarre disease that caused her body to become very thin. Though not an apprentice, she remained with Soter’s band vigorously, and the other stallions didn’t mind.

“You look cheerful,” Lightning quipped, noting the bright smile on the mare’s muzzle.

Thunder tossed his forelock with a neighing laugh. “What did you expect?” he joked. “She and Granite became mates yesterday!”

Dove blushed at his comment. Granite was formerly a guard from the Royal Herd until he became a secret follower of Soter. He later left the Royal Herd to join Shadow’s after Soter came back to life. It didn’t take long for him and Dove to form a *special* bond with each other.

“Has Granite come back yet?” Dove asked the Six (as everyone in the herd now nicknames the six stallions). “He said he was going to bring his cousin to meet me.”

Lightning turned his head to the horizon. “We haven’t seen—” He stopped as he squinted. “Oh, wait. There he is.”

The horses followed his gaze, spotting the silver-dapple stallion trotting towards the herd at the distance, his gleaming white mane dancing in the breeze. Another horse, a young, brown blanket-appaloosa stallion was following close behind. The Six were naturally curious by the brown stallion, for he looked very familiar.

Suddenly, Stone’s mouth dropped open and exclaimed: “*You!*”

Slightly startled by the outburst, the blanket appaloosa looked at Granite. “Told you he’d remember me,” he nickered.

At once, Stone's friends stared in shocked, recognizing the stallion as one of King Wildfire's guards who arrested Soter—and whom Stone attacked by ripping off of his ear.

"My friends," Granite nickered after nuzzling Dove. "This is my cousin, Puma. He's one of us."

Stone glared at Granite. "He's one of Wildfire's *goons!*"

"Stone!" Dove exclaimed.

Puma lowered his head in slight shame. "He's right. I did arrest Soter. At first, I thought He was a fake like everyone else in the Royal Herd did. But right when Soter healed my ear after you—" He gestured to Stone with his muzzle. "—attacked me, everything changed. It was then that I knew that Soter was the Light Horse from the Prophecy and the stories my father told me."

Granite chimed in, "Puma would like to join your band."

Lightning and his friends considered the request, but Stone was suspicious.

"How do we know you're not here to spy on us?" he demanded, flattening his ears.

"King Wildfire doesn't know Granite and I are here," Puma replied truthfully. "We snuck away last night. Besides, the king's too busy to even notice."

"Tell them about the voice," Granite urged Puma.

"What voice?" Stone nickered in puzzlement.

Puma closed his eyes and replied, "Last night, I heard an echoing neigh in the wind, saying: *Puma, follow me*. I recognize it as... Soter's voice."

The Six were silent in surprise.

"You... *heard* Soter?" Dove asked.

Puma chuckled. "At first I thought I was going crazy. But when I told Granite, he said that I should meet the six of you." He lowered his head in respect. "With your permission, I would like to join your group... so I can learn more about Soter."

Stone looked to each of his friends.

"Come on, big brother," Sunspot urged. "We could use another member."

Finally, Stone relented. "Fine. You can join our group."

Puma sighed in relief, but then, with a glance towards Granite, he asked: "Is it... really true that Soter is... *alive?*"

When the others answered "Yes", Sunspot jokingly added: "Either that or we're all crazy."

Puma chuckled. "I would've said you were crazy..." He glanced at Granite. "But, if Granite says that it happened, then I believe you."

Thunder shook his head. "You had to be there."

Dove stepped to the side, cocking her head towards the herd. “Let’s introduce you to everyone else. Then we’ll tell you all about it.”

Soon, Puma was introduced to Shadow, his mate Sierra and his daughter Aurora; Starlight, the herd’s deputy; and the rest of the herd, who all welcomed him with whole hearts. Afterwards, the horses told Puma all they knew of Soter’s life— from His miraculous birth to His resurrection.



While the horses were still chatting, Soter the Light Horse stood watching a short distance away, though no one could see Him. He smiled, pleased that Puma had heard His voice last night and decided to listen. He knew that Stone and the others will add Puma to their “circle” as Dusk’s replacement.

“So…” a sinister voice hissed from behind Him. “… You finally show Your face here in Equus.” There was a brief pause. “I assume You enjoyed Your *welcome-home* /’*victory* celebration in the Paradise.”

The glowing, white Horse with golden wings didn’t respond or react. Being all-knowing, however, He knew that His arch-nemesis, Abaddon the Dark Horse, was standing close by.

The dark, horse-headed dragon slunk closer, his red eyes flashing. “You may have won that day in the Lair of the Wolves, *Light Horse*,” he spat. “But this is far from over. I will have my revenge! And I will start by destroying every last horse you love!”

Soter remained quiet, as if He didn’t hear the threat.

“I’ve already deceived one of Your little friends,” the Dark Horse continued, coiling his long, spiked tail. “The rest are stubborn as mules! But with the right pressure, they just might break! They are weak! Oh, yes! I will make sure that they will fail you! Once my minions and I have finished with them, I’ll go after your precious family! I kill every last one of them, starting with that shrimp-of-a-mare that gave birth to you!”

Soter still didn’t say anything.

Frustrated by the silent treatment, Abaddon lashed out his forked tongue, hissing: “You will be sorry You defeated me, Light Horse! Mark my words, once you have no followers left in this planet, You will—”

Having heard enough, Soter twitched an ear, and the Dark Horse’s mouth was suddenly clamped shut.

“MMMFF!” Abaddon exclaimed, shaking his head and swiping his claws at his muzzle, desperate to free Himself. But he was powerless against the all-powerful Light Horse.

Soter kept His eyes on Shadow's herd as he said in a quiet but powerful tone, "You may attack My herd and My apprentices, but they will have the power to resist you."

The Dark Horse stared in bewilderment. "HMMF?!"

Soter turned towards Abaddon, now glowing as bright as the sun. Hissing, Abaddon shrank back and arched one of his heavy webbed wings over his head, shielding his eyes from the Light Horse's glow.

"You are partially correct, Abaddon," Soter spoke as he strode towards the cowering Dark Horse. "This *is* not over." He paused, His nostrils flaring as He narrowed His eyes. "This is just the beginning."

With those words, He unfolded His glorious golden-tipped wings, reared on His hindlegs, sounding a loud, thunderous neigh that cause the ground to tremble, and disappeared in a flash of light, while Abaddon also disappeared in a puff of black smoke.

The herd instantly fell silent and stood still, hearing Soter's cry that pierced their hearts and sent chills in their bodies.

"What... was that?" Puma finally gasped, his heart pounding, but for some reason, he wasn't afraid.

Shadow, older and wiser, smiled at the younger horse and replied, "That was Soter. I believe He was letting us know that He is watching over us."

At those words, the Six begin to sense that they will not be waiting for the Cloud Horse for much longer.